

FRONTIER BOYS

ON THE OVERLAND TRAIL



CAPT. WYN ROOSEVELT



10



"NOW I'LL SHOW YOU THE WAY."
Frontier Boys on Overland trail.

THE FRONTIER BOYS ON THE OVERLAND TRAIL

BY
CAPT. WYN ROOSEVELT

ILLUSTRATED BY
S. SCHNEIDER



New York
THE PLATT & PECK CO.

THE FRONTIER BOYS

By CAPT. WYN ROOSEVELT

This series tells the adventures of Jim, Joe, and Tom Darlington, first in their camp wagon as they follow the trail to the great West in the early days. They are real American boys, resourceful, humorous, and—but you must meet them. You will find them interesting company. They meet with thrilling adventures and encounters, and stirring incidents are the rule, not exception.

Historically, these books present a true picture of a period in our history as important as it was picturesque, when the nation set its face toward this vast unknown West, and conquered it.

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THE FRONTIER BOYS ON THE OVERLAND TRAIL

CHAPTER I

WESTWARD HO!

"HEY, there, Tom, why did you hitch the trace under the off horse's hind leg?" asked Jim, from the front seat of our prairie schooner.

"I didn't; I reckon the beast kicked over; he is always doing that."

"You fix it," commanded Jim.

"All right; but you are always kickin'," Tom acquiesced.

"No, it's old Bill, who does the kickin'," retorted Jim.

"Does that suit you, boss?" asked Tom, as he lifted Bill's stubborn hind leg into its proper place between the traces. Then with a crack of the long whip by the driver, we started briskly off.

"All aboard, Pike's Peak or bust," I yelled, as we crossed the line into Kansas, with our horses' heads turned westward, until at last, after many

adventures, we should reach the Rocky Mountains in Colorado, in search of the mine we believed was there for us.

"Did you mail that letter to the home folks," inquired Jim of me.

"Sure I did," I replied; "I mailed it before we left Kansas City."

"Lucky you didn't forget it," remarked Jim, "for we won't see a postoffice again for some time." These were the contents of the letter:

"SOMEWHERE, MISSOURI,

"May 19th, 18—.

"Dear Folks,—

"We were mighty glad to get your letter at Sedalia and to hear that you and all our friends back east were well. Jim thanks you for remembering his birthday. He is quite proud because he is sixteen. But he does not have it much on Tom and I, because as we are twins our combined age of near thirty years gives us the advantage. Then, too, we have the distinction of being named for grandfather, who fought in the Revolutionary War. So Jim cannot boss us on the ground of his new birthday.

"We are having the time of our lives and haven't been sick once, except Jim who ate too many paw-paws the other day. We got through Missouri all

right, without being held up by Jesse James and his gang, but maybe they will catch us in Kansas. (Don't read this to mother because she will worry.) We saw the place where they robbed a train on the Wabash last week. It was a mighty lonesome spot. A deep cut in the woods with a swamp nearby. They piled a lot of ties on the track and the headlight of the engine showed the ties just in time for the engineer to stop, with her nose almost against it. We were sure glad to get out of those woods, without being robbed.

"The horses are in fine shape and are as fat as butter. Old Bill sprained his hind leg by getting his foot caught when we were crossing a creek. We rested him for a day and he is all right now. Tom does the cooking and Jim and I look after the horses and do the foraging.

"Sometimes we feel as though we would like to be home and see the old town again and all the home folks. I wonder if our boys will win the pennant this year. I wish I was there to pitch for the team. That Morris school pitcher is a corker. He's got an awful drop. But it was my high in-shoot that fooled them. No more baseball for us until we have made our fortunes in Colorado, then we will buy some new uniforms for the team and treat the girls to enough ice cream to last them a week.

"How is old Rover? I should like to see him. We have a fine dog that a farmer gave Dan in Ohio. He is part Newfoundland (that is, the dog, not the farmer), and part collie. When this letter reaches you we will be in the wilds of Kansas and do not worry if you do not hear from us for some time. We have learned how to take care of ourselves. Love to all the folks from Tom, Jim and

"Your affectionate son,

"JO DARLINGTON."

So much for the letter. We will now continue our trip.

"I wonder if we will see any game to-day?" remarked Jim.

"If we do it's Tom's turn to stay with the horses," I said.

"You can't hit anything, not even the broadside of a barn, to say nothing of a deer or prairie chicken," put in Tom.

"That's all right," I replied, "it's my turn anyway."

We were now trotting steadily along the prairie road. Suddenly Tom pulled the horses to a standstill.

"There's some prairie chickens, sitting on the fence posts," he said.

Immediately Jim and I grabbed our respective

shotguns out of the back of the wagon. Cautiously we got off on the far side of the wagon and crawled along in the road screened by the tall grass and weeds.

"Don't shoot until I say fire," cautioned Jim in a stage whisper. However, I did not wait for the word of command but let fly when I was within fifty yards of the nearest bird. Instantly the heavy bundles of gray feathers whirled a short distance into the air. Jim brought his gun to his shoulder and fired. One of the birds dropped into the tall grass. It made good eating that evening by our first campfire on the prairie. Our first night in Kansas and what followed we will remember as long as we live.

"Let's camp under this big cottonwood, boys," I said. "It's a dandy place. It will be shady during the day and we can stay here for a couple of days and fish and hunt."

"Don't you know better than that by this time, Jo," said Tom.

"Of course, he don't," chimed in Jim, "he don't never think."

"Well what's the matter with that place, anyway, you wise guys," I asked.

"Humph, don't you see, that the creek has been all over here, onc't. What's to hinder it from rising again and drowning us out. It looks as black as

thunder up north now," retorted Tom. So that was settled by the majority. Our tent was pitched on a rather narrow shelf below the higher bank of the old time river. It was now time to feed the horses.

"How much grain do you mix with the bran?" I asked, holding a nose bag in either hand. This was just to be mean for I knew it would stir up my dear brothers.

"What d' y'e think of that," exclaimed Jim, looking at Tom, "he ain't learned yet."

"One quart of grain to two of bran, you bloom-in' Injun," replied Tom grimly.

"That's so, I forgot," I said mildly, "I hope you will mix those biscuits as well as I do this feed."

Then I carried the well filled bags to the whinnying horses and they plunged their noses deep into the grain before I could fit the strap over their ears.

CHAPTER II

THE ALARM

THE two boys slept in the tent and I in the wagon. I had our faithful watchdog for company. He had thick black hair with a white "shirt front" on his chest and he was a bully fighter.

I felt very comfortable as I lay back in the wagon under the blankets with the dog at my feet and my rifle near my side. I was glad to be off the ground, so there could be no rattlesnakes crawling over me.

About midnight a heavy storm come on and I could hear the rain pattering in large drops on the canvas roof of the wagon, and flashes of lightning showed the wet stretch of rainy plains.

Suddenly the dog, "Ben," jumped to the front of the wagon barking furiously. Hastily grabbing my rifle, I looked out into the darkness but could see nothing, but the dog evidently did, for every hair on his back was bristling. Then a flash of lightning showed me three men on horseback, with broad sombreros and armed with rifles, making off with our horses. Instantly I brought my rifle to

my shoulder and fired at the men as they started off with their booty. I ducked down just in time, as three spurts of fire jumped out, then the bullets tore through the canvas over my head.

Jim and Tom came running out from the tent hurriedly armed.

"What's the matter," yelled Tom.

"Some horse thieves have stolen our horses," I cried, and we started in chase. The men were somewhat delayed by the antics of our frightened horses. A flash of lightning revealed the desperadoes, crossing the stream, about a quarter of a mile above us.

"Come on, boys," said Jim, "they are coming down the south bank of the creek."

"I bet that they are some of Jesse James' gang from Missouri," said Tom, "and they have been on our trail."

We now plunged into the stream, which was up to our waists, holding our rifles well above our heads, we reached the opposite bank. Finding our way through the thin woods on the other side, we came to a deep gully, which cut down towards the creek.

"They will have to cross this higher up," I said, "and perhaps we can head them off."

We had gone perhaps two hundred yards when we heard the sound of horses' hoofs and the heavy

muffled voices of the men talking as they came in our direction.

"Are you all ready," whispered Tom. "Yes," I said, as I threw the lever of my rifle down, bringing it up again with a cartridge in the barrel. We had not long to wait. We could just see the dark forms of three men on horseback as they started to cross the gully about a hundred and fifty feet above where we laid in ambushade.

"Now let them have it," whispered Tom, and three rifle shots rang out together. There was a terrific yell as they fired in return and I felt a burning sensation in my left shoulder. We heard a thud as of a heavy body falling then the sound of galloping hoofs.

"I believe that we've got one of them" said Jim.

We hurried up the ravine and saw a black body in front of us and an object trying to get loose.

"Quick, boys," yelled Jim, and he ran ahead of us and threw himself on the struggling form.

"Help, I can't hold him," and we ran to his assistance, just in time. The desperado had struggled to his feet with Jim clinging to his back like a wildcat. Tom made a flying tackle about the fellow's knees and I sat on his head.

"Get his gun, Jo," Jim yelled to me. This I did and we had the Missourian covered and without a weapon. Suddenly his horse, which we had

supposed was shot, got to his feet and galloped off. It seemed that he had stepped in a prairie dog hole, fallen, and just to be contrary had laid still like the broncho he was.

"Well, sonny, what are you going to do with me," asked our captive of Jim, whom he appeared to regard as the captain.

"You march to the tent and then we will see," replied Jim.

"You haven't got a chaw of tobacco, any of you boys? I reckon, I spilled mine when my horse fell."

"No, we don't chew," replied Tom.

"That's too bad," he returned, "Whar are you fellars from anyhow?"

"Never mind about that," replied Jim, "we want our hosses back."

"Did you lose some? Waal thet's bad too. What did they look like, may be I could find them for you uns."

"No, you don't," retorted Tom, "you stay with us until we get them back, you fellows stole them."

"It does look sort of suspicious, but it was so dark we couldn't tell what color they was. We missed some horses ourselves back in Missouri and I reckon you boys took them."

"Oh, ho, that's your game is it," replied Tom. "Maybe you will change your tune."

By this time we had arrived at the camp and by the light of the lantern we had a good look at our prisoner. He did not look like the desperadoes we had read about. He was not over twenty, and more like a big heavy-limbed farmer boy, with very black hair heavily plastered down by the soaking rain. He wore blue overalls, a cheap black shirt and a gray felt hat.

"I'll just make myself comfortable, boys," he said, seating himself on the grub box, "and please keep that purp of yours from hurting himself chewing on my boot."

"Lay down, Ben," commanded Jim, to the dog, who was bristling and growling around the stranger.

"Why, sonny," he said, looking at me, "something has torn your coat."

"Gee, Jo, it looks as if a bullet had done that," said Tom.

"That's what it is," said Jim, making a hasty examination, and the skin on my shoulder had a red streak.

"I remember when those fellows fired, something seemed to burn my shoulder and I guess it was a bullet."

"Lucky it didn't go any lower or it would have broken your shoulder," remarked Tom.

"That must have been Cal did that. He's awful

careless with weapons, especially at night," drawled the Missourian.

"I guess you belong to Jesse James' gang," I said, "they are apt to be careless with weapons." A black look came into his eyes, that made him ugly enough.

"Ugh!" he growled, "you boys have been reading dime novels, I reckon, tenderfeet from the east, that's what you are."

"Here, don't touch that knife," said the ever watchful Jim, grabbing a knife, at the same moment, from under the man's carefully creeping hand, "we ain't such tenderfeet as you might think."

"I was just going to clean my nails out of respect to the company. You mustn't be narvous, boys, because of the past excitement."

"We ain't narvous," I said, adopting part of his dialect, "but we are kinder sleepy being kept up so late. Why didn't you fellows call earlier and we could have given you a warmer welcome."

"It was warm enough, sonny," grinned our prisoner, "but growing boys need sleep so you just turn in and I will look out for the camp and sees that no one steals the dog."

"Mighty thoughtful of you," replied Jim, "but somebody might come along and steal you and we can't spare you just yet."

"That's so," I put in, "it would be mighty lonesome without you now the horses are gone."

"I never thought I would make such good friends so soon, and you tenderfeet too. It ain't my nature to make friends with strangers sudden as it were."

"No, I bet it ain't," exclaimed Tom, who had been keeping very quiet, "but you make friends with their horses, pretty quick. But it's dangerous business, showing such a sudden fondness for animals that don't belong to you."

"That just shows," said the Missourian sorrowfully, "how you are misunderstood when you are found in bad company. Now if anybody should come along and see me in such desperate company my reputation would be gone."

Tom was seated by our camp table with his rifle laid across his knees, convenient to his hand. Tom was the thinker of the crowd, while Jim and I were for action. It turned out that he had not been thinking in vain as he addressed the Missourian. It might have been a court martial as far as Tom's demeanor was concerned. He was a veritable judge.

CHAPTER III

THE START

"You might just as well stop this kidding and get down to business. We have the drop on you and you know it. Now we have got to have our horses back and soon too." Thus spoke Tom.

"Just so," replied the prisoner, sitting up on the box, with his powerful arms resting on his knees and looking narrowly at Tom, "what's your proposition?"

"It's plain and straight," he replied, "you know that you and your gang won't stand any chance in Kansas. If there isn't a tree handy, they will string you to a telegraph pole."

"You've got a fool notion that I belong to the Jesse James gang. Maybe we belong around here," growled the prisoner.

"No, you don't," rejoined Tom decisively, "trust me to know a Missourian when I see one. I don't care whether you belong to Jesse James' gang or to the Younger Brothers or a crowd of your own, what I want you to tell us is where can we find

those horses or I will have a posse of citizens here before noon who will attend to your case."

The Missourian glowered at the ground for a full minute, turning the matter over in his mind. What decided him was probably a desire to get even with the gang who had deserted him for their own reasons.

"Waal," he said, "if I tell you-uns, will you promise to turn me free?"

"Yes we will promise that," replied Tom, "and we will keep our word."

"I believe yer," he said, "Now I will tell ye boys where you can find them horses. They are at a ranch fifteen miles southeast of here."

"How in the dickens are we ever going to find it," I inquired.

"Just hold on young fellar and I'll tell yer. You follow down the creek for five miles, to where there is an island, then turn straight south down the valley, until you come to the second ranch, with an adobe barn. You'll find your horses thar in the corral. Then it's up to you to get them. I don't think Cal will miss a second time, sonny," he said, looking at me.

"Cal had better look out or we will corral him, the same as we did you," I said with the confidence of youth.

"I'd a whole lot rather corral a laughing hyena

than Cal Jenkins. He ain't good natured like I am," he replied.

"Well, boys, who is to go," queried Tom, "some-one will have to stay with our friend here."

"Never mind about me, I won't get lonesome, boys, if you all go. Sometimes I reckon even two is a crowd."

"We will draw lots," said Tom, cutting a bit of paper into three different lengths, with his trusty bowie knife.

"I'll hold 'em," said the Missourian.

"The short one stays," quoth Tom. I solemnly drew the first paper, then Tom, and Jim took what was left. As I held mine up, it was the longest and Jim's next, so Tom was elected to do guard duty.

It was now getting light and we had to make our arrangements. The storm had cleared, leaving a few rolled up clouds on the western horizon. We held a short council of war in front of our tent, keeping an eye on our prisoner, who lay lazily back on the grub box.

"I don't think that we had better start until about noon," I said, "Tom will have to have some sleep because we can't tell when we will get back and there is no use for us to get to the ranch until after dark."

"That's so," acquiesced Jim, "you have more

sense than I thought for, Jo, and we can make that fifteen miles easy this afternoon." That was true for we were seasoned walkers and in fine condition for any adventure. So Tom put in five hours sleeping in the wagon and from the way he snored, we judged that he was enjoying it. We kept our friend company in the tent and busied ourselves cleaning up our rifles and preparing for the trip.

"It's a fact, boys," said the Missourian, "that I don't belong to the James gang, but I have seen Jesse, though I didn't know it at the time."

• "What did he look like," questioned Jim.

"Waal, how do you suppose he would look?" he drawled.

"All the pictures I ever saw of him, he was about six feet tall, with square shoulders, raven black hair and long moustaches, red cheeks, a bowie knife stuck in his boot; two six shooters, one at either hip."

"Missouri" laughed.

"It was this way," he said, "I was eating supper in the dining room of the depot at Independence, Mo. The fellow who waited on the table where I sat was a sawed-off little runt, with very light hair and a short, silky, yellow beard. He had a very soft voice like a woman's. I thought to myself, 'Here is a Miss Nancy,' and I gave him some guff about the eggs.

" 'I 'low, stranger, you will eat them eggs,' and he gave me a look out of a gray eye that went through a fellow's bone. I never saw such an eye in a man. It meant business sure.

" I ate the eggs and never twittered. Afterwards I found out that that same fellow was Jesse James. The police were looking everywhere for him and he was right under their nose, where they never thought of looking. But he didn't look any more dangerous than sonny sitting there, just as innocent."

" I ain't innocent," I said, angry at this attack upon my character.

" Waal you look it," continued the Missourian, " though appearances are sartainly deceivin' sometimes."

When twelve o'clock arrived we woke Tom and set off on our dangerous mission.

" If you see Cal or any of the boys, close enough to get acquainted," said our prisoner, " you be sure and ask them for a chaw of tobacco, because I'm likely to fade away if I don't have some soon. Tell 'em not to forget their old pal in his terrible captivity."

We promised to do our best for him. When we left camp we were as well prepared for any emergency as we could be. We wore gray pants, slouch

hats and shirts of the same color, so that we would not be easily observable. We also had plenty of ammunition for our rifles in the belts around our waists. Jim carried a large canteen for after we left the river, it was hard telling where we would find water in that dry country. We were also well supplied with food, which we carried in sacks slung over our shoulders. It was pleasant walking the first part of the way, with plenty of shade to rest under when we felt like it, but we did not stop often for our muscles were hard as nails and nothing seemed to tire us.

One would naturally have thought that we two boys would have been nervous to say the least, going to meet those desperadoes on their own ground, but we had no fear and rather looked forward to the adventure. In the first place we had to have those horses and now we knew why these frontiersmen hung horse thieves without a trial. We could sympathize with their feelings. We determined to give those desperadoes something to remember us by.

"I believe this is the island 'Missouri' told us about," said Jim.

"What time is it," I asked; Jim pulled out his heavy silver watch.

"Quarter of two."

"Then this is the place," I said, "we would do five miles in about that time and we have taken things easy."

"There's no hurry. Let's wade over to the island and see what's on it. Perhaps we might find something," said Jim.

"No," I said, "we have to reach this ranch before dark, and we ought not to take a chance, because we might lose the way." So it was decided and we faced about directly south down a broad shallow valley.

"This is certainly nice walking," said Jim, as we swung along over the curly buffalo grass, that gave us a springy footing.

"Look out!" cried Jim, jumping forward and about three feet in the air. I stopped just in time. There directly in front of me was a rattler coiled and ready to strike. Then he launched himself at me his full length, with his fanged mouth open. Jim whaled a big stone at him, striking him squarely back of his ugly head and then we jumped on him with both feet.

"Cut off his rattles, Jim," I said, because I was finicky about touching the snake myself, but Jim didn't mind.

"He was six years and a half old," said Jim, counting his rattles, one for each year and a button at the end.

"There is the first ranch," said Jim, after we had been walking an hour.

"We had better keep out of sight of it," I said. "Maybe they are friends of Cal Jenkins and his gang." So we made a detour to the west and then took up our trail again. Suddenly Jim pulled me down into the tall grass.

"Be careful," said Jim, "I believe that there is a lookout over on that ridge."

Slowly I raised my head and looked through a screen of young sunflowers.

"It's a man on horseback," I said, "and he is riding this way. I wonder if he saw us?" Then we laid close to the warm earth, our rifles within our grasp, ready for action and the sheltering grass was around us.

CHAPTER IV

THE RECONNOISSANCE

IN a short time we heard the sound of horses' hoofs and the creak of leather as the rider changed his position in the saddle. Evidently he was on the lookout for something. After a minute, I slowly raised my head and saw a short, heavy set man on a buckskin broncho and a rifle swung in his powerful left hand, as light as a straw and an ugly mongrel dog with gray wiry hair followed close behind the horse's heels.

Suddenly the man turned in his saddle and looked directly at the spot where we were hiding, and I dropped as if I had been shot and hugged close to the earth. "You fool," whispered Jim, "can't you keep still?"

"Go on Bucks," cried the man in a hoarse voice, "sic 'em, sic 'em, root 'em out," and the dog began to run around in widening circles, with his nose close to the ground. Luckily for us, he did not strike our trail. In a short time the man called his dog to heel and rode slowly down the valley. With the keen instinct of the frontiersman, he knew that

there was some enemy in the vicinity. We gave him plenty of time and at last he and his dog disappeared over a low ridge in the distance.

"By Jove, that was a close call," said Jim, as we took up the trail again, "it's a wonder you did not give us away peeking your pesky head."

"A miss is as good as a mile," I replied. "I guess we will have to leg it now. It must be after four." I cast a calculating eye at the sun which was edging down toward the low western horizon. Jim consulted his large silver chronometer.

"It's twenty minutes after four," he said, "we will have plenty of time to sight that ranch before it gets dark."

"Say Jim, what would you have done if a rattlesnake had crawled towards you in the grass when that man was coming?"

"I'd let him crawl," replied Jim, "if you keep still as a frozen Injun they won't bite you. I read once about a man who was sleeping out on the plains and he felt something on his chest and he didn't move, just opened one eye and then he saw a big rattler coiled up there peeking at him and his head going back and forth. The man just kept quiet, didn't even breathe until the snake stretched out for a siesta and then he gave a yell and threw that snake up so high that when it came down it broke its neck."

"Gee!" I said, "but that was a fright. Now Jim, what are we going to do when we get to the ranch?"

"Knock at the door of course, and say, 'Good evening, Mr. Jenkins, if you are through with our horses, we should like to borrow them.'"

"Quit your kidding," I said, "and tell me what your scheme is."

"You wait until we get there and then I will show you," said Jim, with more confidence than he doubtless felt.

"I bet when we get to that ridge, we will see the ranch," I said, "it won't take us more than a quarter of an hour to reach it."

"Shucks," replied Jim, disgusted, "that ridge is three miles off," and so it proved. Jim was a much better plainsman than I was. It was after five o'clock when we arrived at the crest of the ridge and looked over.

"There's the place, cried Jim, who was slightly ahead of me. He was on his hands and knees, looking cautiously over and I crawled up carefully behind him.

"My it's a squatty looking place, it makes me shiver to look at it," and there was something sinister about the ranch. An atmosphere of secretiveness and outlawry.

"I don't see why you should shiver," replied

Jim, who was perfectly matter-of-fact, "it's certainly warm enough and I'm sweating considerable."

As for the ranch, it was a collection of low buildings set in the middle of the valley. A long adobe barn, with a corral around it in which were several horses loose.

"Hang the luck," exclaimed Jim. "I don't see a sign of our horses."

"Maybe they are in the stable," I suggested.

"Well, we will have to wait until dusk before we can find out. I am going to get a good idea of how the land lies while it is light." So he lay with his head propped on his hands reconnoitering through the tall grass.

"There's a windmill back of the barn and a watering trough."

"And two hay stacks close to the end of the barn," I said, "that will be a good place to hide if the men should come out and look for us. Say Jim, what is that funny looking roof in the yard close to the ground?" Jim laughed.

"You are a sure enough tenderfoot. Why that's a dugout with a sod roof. Just like a cellar with a roof. Lots of people in Kansas live in dugouts."

"Funny place to live in," I said.

"They are all right in this country," replied Jim, "cool and dry in summer, warm and dry in winter,

the wind can't blow them down and if a prairie fire comes along it will burn right over a dugout without hurting it."

"I guess that I would just as soon live in the dugout as in that shanty," I said, pointing to the other building in the yard. It evidently had not more than two rooms and there was an outside chimney built of mud and sticks against one end of the shanty. It was unpainted and had weathered a dingy brown.

"I don't see anybody stirring, perhaps this would be our chance to get our horses," said Jim.

"I wouldn't risk it," I said, "that man we saw maybe is in the neighborhood. We had better wait till it gets dark."

Jim's plan, though it seemed daring, may have been the best after all.

"I shouldn't wonder if those fellows had gone off on another raid," I said, "but they have probably left someone on guard."

"Well, we have an hour before sunset to rest in, so let's take it easy," said Jim, so we slid down behind the ridge and loosening our belts stretched ourselves out comfortably on the warm grass and ate our beef and bread with a huge appetite and did not mind even if the water from the canteen tasted rather warm.

"My, this is comfort," said Jim, "beats lying

on the old lounge in the library at home and reading a yarn about the wild west. We ain't reading it now, we are seeing it for sure."

"Yes," I said sleepily, "it suits me all right." In another minute I was sound asleep and I was home again trying to tell the folks all about the adventures of our trip. Trying to answer twenty questions at once. "Yes and what do you think happened when I was sleeping out on the plains one night? Why a rattlesnake coiled upon my chest and was just about to strike me in the face, when all of a sudden I threw him high in the air."

"Hey, what's the matter?" I exclaimed fighting desperately, with someone who was trying to choke me.

"Quit your yelling Jo," warned Jim, who had his hand over my mouth, "what's the matter with you anyway?"

"I was dreaming about rattlesnakes," I said.

"Well it certainly sounded like it," commented Jim.

"What's that?" he asked suddenly.

"I don't hear anything, but maybe you do. Your ears are sharper than mine. Just like a burro's. Why that's somebody talking," I said cautiously. We climbed to the top of the ridge and looked over.

"Why it's Cal Jenkins and his side partner driving some more stolen horses in," said Jim.

Sure enough, there were the two desperadoes coming up from the south with half a dozen horses, driven in front of them. Occasionally the wind would carry the sound of their voices to us as they urged their horses along. We could see them quite plainly.

"I bet that's Cal Jenkins," said Jim, "the tall one riding the little roan. He is a raw-boned old villain sure enough. What are you doing Jo," exclaimed Jim in alarm. "Don't fire, your fool."

"I was just drawing a bead on Mr. Jenkins," I said, looking along the barrel of the rifle until the sight on the end of its nose was pointing directly at the center of his blue flannel shirt.

The two men drove the horses into the corral and shutting the gate, led their own bronchos into the adobe barn. In a short time one of them came out leading a bay horse and a black towards the watering trough back of the barn.

"Look, Jo, there are our two horses," exclaimed Jim, "the rascals, it makes my blood hot. I would like to take a shot at that fellow right now. Very well, Mr. Horsethieves, we will give you a surprise to-night," and if Jim had been giving "Regulus to the Cathaginians," he could not have spoken with more feeling.

The sun had now gone below the horizon and the long summer twilight was fading into dusk, when we prepared to move on the enemy. We gave our belts an extra hitch, saw that our rifles were in working order, with one cartridge in the gun and fifteen in the magazine, then we pulled our hats tight down over our foreheads and slowly and cautiously crept down the slope of the ridge towards the ranch.

CHAPTER V

THE FIRST ROUND

WE crossed a little run which was a brook in the rainy season and came to a barb wire fence some distance back of the barn. Jim got through as slick as a whistle, but my flannel shirt got caught on some barbs.

"Here, Jim," I said in a muffled voice, "come and help me let go. This blamed barb wire is holding me fast."

"Well, don't wriggle," said Jim, "and I'll get you loose. I would think that by this time you would know how to get through a barb wire fence. You will be waking those people if you ain't careful. I never saw such a fellow."

No sooner had we started towards the barn than Jim's foot struck an old tin pail that was hidden in the grass and fell forward on his right hand, keeping his rifle from jamming by holding it in his left hand. Jim made considerable racket falling and the dog ran out from the yard barking ferociously. We laid very low, scarcely breathing, and after a while the dog quieted down.

"Who kicked up the fuss this time?" I asked.

"I did," said Jim, "lucky I didn't hurt myself when I fell."

Jim could always find something to take credit for. As it turned out that was a fortunate stumble of Jim's, as will appear later, but you can never guess why.

"I am afraid, Jim, that we are going to have trouble with that dog. I wish he was out of the way, then we could get our horses without any trouble. If we only had some strychnine."

"By gum!" exclaimed Jim, "I have an idea. Just wait till we get back of the barn and I will tell you what we will do."

At last without giving any further alarm we got safely into the corral back of the barn. "Now, Jo, let me have that piece of candle in your grub sack."

I fished around until I found it and handed it to him.

"What do you want this for?" I said.

"You watch me and you will find out," he replied. "Now where is that piece of meat? Here it is."

Then to my surprise he took the head of the rattlesnake, which we had killed, out of his pocket. I had not said anything about it at the time, for Jim was a great fellow to collect curious things and

for all I knew he might be sending it back home to his best girl.

Then by the light of the candle, he cut the snake's white fangs open with his pen knife and with the point of it took out a bit of whitish poison, the most deadly in the world and this he put into a piece of meat, first spitting on it for only in melted form would it be dangerous. Jim's ingenuity surprised me, but he was always smart in some ways.

"Now, Jo, it's your turn. You were always a good thrower. So it's up to you to get this meat under the dog's nose."

"All right, give it to me," I said, "I wonder where the beast is?"

"I saw him lying in front of the door before we came down the hill," said Jim. "If you can only get him, the rest will be easy."

"I might call 'Rover, Rover, good doggie,' and then feed him the meat."

"Don't get funny, Jo," said Jim. "He's no Rover, but a mongrel wolf dog, that's what he is."

"I am going to feed the dog now, goodbye," I said, and slipped away in the darkness.

I decided that my best way was between the two big hay stacks that extended beyond the end of the barn toward the shanty, where the dog was keeping

guard. I would be in this way protected on both sides.

I carefully crawled between the stacks. There was a space of a foot and a half to move in and I felt perfectly protected and shut in, when I suddenly stumbled over something like a man's legs.

Instantly my hand grasped the knife in my belt. It was the only weapon I had because I had left the rifle with Jim. But my fright was short lived, what I thought was a man were two short, round logs, partially covered with hay and a discarded pair of overalls lying on them.

I reached the end of the passage and peering carefully out, I saw the dog lying in front of the door in the lamplight with his nose between his paws.

It was up to me now to make an accurate toss. The distance was not much further than between the pitcher's box and first base and many a runner had I put out on a bunt that rolled too far or a line hit which I had stopped.

I poised myself carefully and then with a well-timed swing of my arm, I tossed the meat towards the dog. It fell a foot before his nose with a gentle thud.

Immediately "Rover" sat up with a bustling growl. Then he cautiously nosed the meat and swallowed it at one gulp.

I did not have to wait long for the results, neither did the dog. In a minute he was stretched out, with his legs quivering and straight, his head wrenched way back and his mouth foaming, but his teeth were so tightly clinched that he could not make a sound that would attract the attention of the men who were in the house. They were having a fierce time over a card game, judging from the oaths and bad language which I could distinctly hear from my position.

In a few minutes all was over and the dog lay stretched out just as though he were sleeping.

This was a good start for our night's work and I went back to where Jim was anxiously waiting behind the barn. "Did you get him?" he asked.

"Sure I did," I replied, "he's as dead as a door nail."

"That's lucky," said Jim. "Now for the next thing on the programme. The horses are in the barn, we are sure of that. But I reckon it's too early to get them. Those fellows will be sure to hear us if we try to take them out now. Better let them get to sleep, then we will chance it. I tell you what's let's do."

"What?" I said, "take a nap for an hour or two."

"No, of course not. You are always wanting to sleep. You would never make a soldier."

"I don't want to be a soldier, it's too much work and too little excitement. What's your scheme?"

"I was thinking we might creep around back of the shanty and have a look at those men."

"That's a fool thing to do. Maybe we might get in the card game."

"If they are playing cards they won't notice us," said Jim, "they will be too busy and it's kind of dull squatting here back of the barn for a couple of hours."

"All right," I said, "if you are looking for amusement, I'm with you."

Moving forward, we took my old trail between the hay stacks and then made a detour back of the shanty, being very careful not to stumble against anything which might give the alarm.

The only thing I ran across was an axe lying on the ground. In the back of the shanty was a small square window, which had no curtain over it. Lifting our heads cautiously we looked in, and there in the middle of the room, sat four men around a rough wooden table playing cards.

"That's Cal Jenkins," whispered Jim, "the one with the gray hair cut close and a scar down his cheek. My, but he is a beaut. I see they keep their guns close like they were expecting company any time."

Just then Jenkins, who was seated facing the

window, looked up and I ducked down, like I was shot.

"My! did you see that fellow's eyes?" I said to Jim in a whisper, though I need not have been so careful for the men were talking loud enough to drown out any noise we made. "Why, his eyes looked as if they had snakes in 'em."

"That's just a cast in his eye," replied Jim, "it does give him a funny look."

"By Jove, Jim, I believe that fellow with his back to us is the one we saw this afternoon. It's just about his size."

"That's exactly who it is, Jo. My, I should like to surprise those fellows right now." He made a motion to bring his rifle up.

"It wouldn't take them long to knock that candle out," I said, "and they would stand a better show in the dark than we would."

Just then Cal Jenkins pushed his chair back from the table and we got ready to retreat further into the night, but instead of going to the door, he went to the other side of the room and took down a flat looking bottle from a shelf in a corner.

"That's some more whiskey," said Jim, "I wish they would drink enough to make them sleepy."

"No danger of that," I said, "those Missourians can stand a lot of drink. What time is it, Jim?"

"Just nine o'clock. We will give them till eleven to get asleep."

"Waal boys," said Jenkins. "Here's luck," and the quartette threw the whiskey down at a gulp.

"We'll have to be leaving this farm about three in the mornin' boss," said the man with his back toward us, "if we are to git them horses over the line into Missouri before the sheriff and his gang strike our trail."

"Thet's right, pard," replied Cal, "it's a good haul we've made this trip. Those kids' horses are fine and fat and oughter bring \$150 apiece."

"We'll show you whether we are kids before we are through with you to-night," growled Jim, "Mr. Jenkins ain't the only persimmon on the creek."

"One more deal, pard," said the other, "and then I'll go out and see if them horses are all right before we turn in."

"Say, Jo," whispered Jim, "I must get that dog out of the way before he comes out and sees it," and he slipped away in the darkness while I watched anxiously through the window.

Jim had only been gone a minute when Jenkins pushed back his chair from the table.

"What's that noise?" he asked.

"Nothin' 'cept the wind, I reckon," replied "pard."

My heart jumped to my throat and began to thump violently as I got my rifle ready.

"I tell you I hearn somethin' outside," declared Cal, and he rose quickly and with a crouch like a panther went to the door, his ugly looking pistol ready for business.

"Here, you, Tige, come here or I'll break your blasted hide," and he whistled long and low and turning suddenly he looked directly toward the window at which I stood. He then stepped out into the darkness.

CHAPTER VI

TOM AND THE MISSOURIAN

TOM and the Missourian were having a comparatively peaceful time at the camp during the hours following the departure of the brothers.

"It's too hot in this tent, Missouri," said Tom, "let's go out in the shade of the old apple tree for awhile."

"I'm willin' enough," assented "Missouri," "these pesky flies are getting too familiar. One thing I'm grateful for and that is I'm not bald-headed."

"Here's a good big cottonwood," said Tom, "let's make ourselves comfortable," and they threw themselves down with a log for a pillow.

"I hope you won't get frisky and try to run off, Missouri," said Tom.

"You needn't worry," said Missouri, "where would I run to? I'm a poor orphan. My partner's gone back on me and I haven't any friends in this neck of the woods."

"How did you happen to get in this business?" asked Tom.

"Oh, nateral enough. You see my pop was killed by the guerrilos during the wah and ma was left with a brood of kids on a farm where everything was took by one side or anuther during the wah. I was the oldest and I had to get out and hustle for myself, but times was hard, then come the grasshopper year."

"I've heard of that," said Tom, "it must have been fierce."

"It was bad," he assented. "I remember how them grasshoppers come all of a sudden. You might think I was lying, but it's true as the gospel. I was workin' in a cornfield when I noticed a shadder come over the sun and I was surprised because there wasn't a cloud anywhere. And what do you think it was?"

"I don't know," Tom replied.

"Why it was a cloud of grasshoppers coming from Kansas, and they settled on everything and ate the country as clean as a whistle. Why they even ate the hoe handles."

"Oh, get out," laughed Tom, "now you are talking nonsense. You must size me up for a tenderfoot."

"I reckon that was putting it a little strong," admitted "Missouri," "but them hoppers would bite the handles so as to make them kind of rough. The chickens ate so many of them that it made the

eggs strong. And I've seen a big board fence so covered with 'em that you couldn't see the boards at all, just them things a moving. They used to stop the trains, too."

"How was that," inquired Tom, incredulously.

"Why, it was this way. During the day the rails would get hot and towards evening the hoppers would settle on them. Just cover them as thick as 'lasses. Then a train would come rolling along and crush about a million of them and the rails would get as slippery as though they were soaped and the wheels would just spin around."

"Sure if that isn't a whopper it was pretty hard on the hoppers," grunted Tom.

"Well, it was one bad luck after another, and I got plumb discouraged. So I got into Cal Jenkins' gang. And here I am."

"I suppose you would quit it, if you had a chance," said Tom.

"You bet I would. I'm through with Cal and his crowd. If I had been of their stripe through and through they would never have run off and left me."

"What are you going to do now?"

"I'll get out of Kansas the first thing. It isn't healthy for me 'round here. Too much maleria," and he grinned at Tom. "I'll make for the line and get into ole Missouri where I've got some

friends and then maybe I'll go down into Kentucky where my ma's folks have got some kin."

"Better come along with us and try your luck in Colorado," said Tom. "It wouldn't hurt us to have a husky like you when we strike the Indian country."

"Thank you for the invite, sonny, but I've got a little business to settle on my own account before I do any traveling. But you may see me out that way after awhile."

"I hope we do," said Tom cordially.

"I feel kind of slumbrous," said "Missouri," "and I reckon I'll take a nap."

"Well, don't mind if I take a notion to stroll off while you are asleep," said Tom.

"I won't be frightened if I wake up and find myself alone. Make yourself easy. I'll stay by the camp until the boys come home from their trip. I want to hear about my old friends and if they get too promiscuous around here, I kin help you out. I hope the boys won't fergit about that chaw of tobacco."

And pulling his hat down over his eyes he was soon fast asleep.

Tom decided to take his shot gun and go up the creek in search of a little relaxation and relief. He saw a flock of ducks after he had gone a short distance and they finally circled and dropped into

the stream about a half mile further up. When he got near the place where he saw them light, he went carefully on his hands and knees and looking over a screen of grass and weeds he saw eight big Mallards swimming in a pool having a good time and entirely unsuspecting. He was within easy range and taking aim he fired into the group. Two lay still with their heads in the water but the rest rose, and taking hasty aim he fired the second barrel. But with no result except to make the ducks fly faster. Something made him turn and through the long grass on the bank he was conscious of an object moving. At first he thought it was an Indian creeping towards him. Then he saw the object had a long yellow body. For a second he could not move, though he recognized his deadly danger. Then before the prairie panther could spring, Tom dodged behind a tree and made for a tall cottonwood and jumping he caught a lower limb and swung himself up just as the panther sprang, barely missing him. He had left his gun behind and was securely treed while the beast lay crouching and waiting for him to move. Tom climbed up as high as he could and then began to yell.

“Hello! ‘Missouri!’ help!” finally a faint echo came to his ears and in a few minutes he heard heavy footfalls coming on the run, and “Missouri”

burst into view coming through the undergrowth. The panther likewise heard and made off through the grass, bounding like a big cat and soon disappeared.

"The varmint liked to got you, didn't he, sonny?"

"He certainly did," said Tom, "I would have stayed here all night if it hadn't been for you."

"Well, we will take those two ducks and get supper," said "Missouri;" "we can't have any panther steak, but the ducks won't be so tough."

"I hope the boys won't get treed the way I did," said Tom, as they made their way back to camp.

CHAPTER VII

WE MEET OBSTACLES

As soon as Cal Jenkins stepped out of the house I took refuge behind a bush growing against the shanty. Then I heard his heavy, but stealthy footsteps coming around the corner of the house. I could almost see his eyes with their wicked glare, looking right at me and then to my intense relief, he went back into the house.

"What's happened to that dog?" I heard him say, "I don't like this."

"Shucks, he's just snoopin' around for grub," Pard said, "I'll find him when I go ter the barn. Set down and we'll finish this deal." Grumbling to himself, Jenkins took up his greasy pack of cards and the game went on.

But where was Jim? I waited impatiently, then I felt a hand on my shoulder and in spite of myself I jumped.

"What's the matter, it's only me," said Jim's voice.

"That old villain has been out here," I replied, "I don't like his company. Did you get the dog?"

"Sure; I had to carry him and he was mighty heavy and stiff as a board. I didn't dare drag him because it would have made a trail and they would have heard me."

"What did you do with him?"

"I put him in a kind of ditch about two hundred feet from the house, where they won't be likely to find him."

"Well, I have seen all of this interesting game I want. Let's move," I said.

"All right," said Jim, and we slipped away in the darkness and took up our position behind the barn, where we were before, waiting until our friends had retired to their downy blankets.

"By gum! Jim," I exclaimed, as we settled into our places, "we plumb forgot to get that chaw of tobacco for 'Missouri.' He'll be so disappointed that he'll want to shoot."

"You had better go and ask Cal for a plug," said Jim.

"We will have a couple of plugs when we leave this ranch, I bet, and we won't ask Jenkins either. I wish old Pard would come and put his horses to bed."

"Listen," continued Jim, "isn't that someone coming now?"

We crept to the corner of the barn and saw a man

coming with a lantern; the shadow of his legs striding immensely where the light of the lantern cut the darkness.

"That's him," whispered Jim, "wouldn't I like to smash his lantern with a rock. It would certainly be a surprise to the old gent."

"There arn't any rocks in Kansas," I said, "we ought to have brought some with us from York state."

We heard him yanking the gate open and taking an inventory of the horses in the corral.

"Thar's the two blacks, they'll make a fine team for Squar Riggs, back in Missouri. I reckon he'd give three hundred for them. That sorrel with the white face would suit ole Doc Jones. There's powder in him, and the fat bay would please the parson, it's kind of slow and gentle." Then he came to the barn and looked through the window without going in.

"Them's the horses," we heard him say. "I'd like to keep 'em myself, but the Boss got 'em branded."

"To prevent any trouble between you and the Boss, old squesicks, we'll take care of them 'hosses,'" remarked Jim, as the old fellow started back to the house. Jim looked at his watch and it was half past ten.

"We'll give them a half hour to settle down and get to snoring," Jim said, "and then we will get busy."

"Well," I said, a little later, "I guess it's time to move."

"Yes, time's up," exclaimed Jim, getting to his feet. We went through the gate into the corral.

"Don't leave that gate open at all," cautioned Jim, because if any of those fellows should come out and find it wasn't shut, they would be suspicious."

I went back a few steps and carefully closed the gate.

The horses in the corral pricked up their ears, when they saw two strangers and followed us slowly with their heads. We went directly to the door of the barn. I expected to find it unfastened.

"Gee!" exclaimed Jim, "but they have got this locked for fair," he pulled, but the door would not give.

I examined it and found a heavy padlock holding it. We worked and tugged but could not budge it. We dared not make any noise for the shanty was only a few steps away.

"What are we to do now?" I asked, terribly disappointed to meet a fatal obstacle, when success was just in our hands.

"I don't know, let me think," said Jim, and he stood there, I suppose, for five minutes, but it

seemed an hour to me. I kept watching the house, it was dark and ominously quiet. Then I felt something touch me in the middle of the back and I knew it was the muzzle of a gun. No it was the muzzle of the "parson's" old bay horse. I was scared cold.

"Haven't you any sugar for him?" laughed Jim, then he resumed his thinking. I knew Jim was resourceful, but I could see no way but to start for camp without the horses. Then Jim woke up.

"Come along, Jo," he said, "I have a scheme," and he almost dragged me out of the corral. When we arrived back of the barn, he said:

"Hurry up, Jo, help me to find that old pail we struck after we got through the barb wire fence."

"What for?" I asked, hadn't you better get the horses out before you water them?"

"Never mind, you do as I say," and we went through the long grass in search of the pail. When we were about to give it up my foot struck it.

"Now I will show you," remarked Jim, and he went to the water trough and filled the pail and threw it against a selected place at the back of the barn, then he went for some more water.

"I see you are going to make the 'dobe soft and break a place for the horses to get out. You are

all right, Jim," I exclaimed in unusual admiration, for Jim and I being brothers, we never complimented each other.

"I know what I can do. I'll find that axe and we'll break that wall pretty quick," and I went around in the yard and found the axe without much trouble.

I could hear the heavy snoring of the men in the cabin and they little dreamed what was going on under their very noses. When I got back to the barn Jim had quite a place softened and I began my attack. In about fifteen minutes I had a hole cut through about two by three feet.

"Good work, Jo," said Jim. "Now I tell you what you can do. You crawl inside and get the horses all ready. Take their best saddles. Lucky that Bill and Carl are broke to ride. Be careful they don't whinny when they see you first."

"All right," I replied, "give me the candle and the matches."

"I'll finish this job in a half hour," said Jim.

"I can give the horses a feed and get them already by that time," I said. "Lucky the wind is blowing so hard. They won't be so apt to hear us."

Indeed it was blowing a hurricane, and it was perfectly clear with the stars like bright sparks driven before the wind. The windmill was whirring

like mad above our heads in the darkness with a constant "click, click," and whirling to face every change of the wind.

I crawled through the hole without any trouble and as soon as I was in the stable, I lighted the candle and stuck it on a barrel out of the breeze. The horses raised their heads and looked at me, but they did not show that they recognized me.

The air was full of fine dust and I could hear the dull thud of the axe as Jim worked industriously breaking in the wall. I found two half filled sacks of grain standing in a corner and gave the horses a generous feed. They were just about to whinny when they saw me close but I dumped the grain into the box and that diverted their attention. Then I went around back of the stalls, where the saddles hung on wooden pegs.

Just as I passed by the door it was violently shaken, like someone trying to get in, and I stopped and listened breathlessly, then the door was shaken again, like someone was pulling it. But it was the wind which was blowing fiercely through the hole that Jim was widening.

I took down a heavy Mexican saddle, with its high horn and its leather skirt prettily carved and underneath was sheepskin. Bill winced down when I threw it on his back, then I drew the leather cinch tight as I could, for it would not do to have the

saddle turn if we had to make a run for it. There was no telling how soon we might be disturbed.

I then put a similar saddle on Black Carl, but left the bridles hanging on the hooks, until the horses had finished their feed. Then a bright idea came to me.

"I'll fix that gang," I said to myself, "so that they will be delayed even if they do find that we have got the horses."

There were two remaining saddles and bridles hanging back of the stalls. I took my bowie knife from its sheath at my belt. Then I went to work and carved up those saddles in fine style. I also cut the cinches into little bits and the hair girths too. I put the small iron rings the cinches went through, in my pocket.

I did the same for the bridles. Then I picked up the first saddle and started with it towards the north end of the barn where there was a lot of loose hay thrown down. The wind was blowing at a great rate and rattling everything, me included. I had just stepped into the hay when suddenly out of the further corner rose a black figure. I could just indistinctly make out a pale face and gleaming eyes.

I stood petrified with terror for a moment, then I raised the saddle high over my head, and was about to hurl it, when to my immense relief, I saw

it was a black calf with a white face. It was as much scared as I was, perhaps that is what made its face so white.

I hid the saddles far down in the hay. I had just done this when Jim came in, covered with sweat and dirty as a coal miner.

"All aboard," he said, "I have finished my job.

"So have I," and I told him what I had done.

"Good for you, Jo, that's the stuff," said Jim, heartily. "Now we will get the horses and start. It's just twelve o'clock. "Hello, what's that?" he cried, gazing into the far corner. I grinned.

"That's a black calf. What did you suppose it was. Not afraid of veal, I hope?"

"I thought it was a man. Well let's get the horses."

I put the bridle on Bill, who was my favorite, because he was perfectly gentle and Jim took Black Carl. We backed them as slowly and carefully as we could out of the stalls so as not to make any unnecessary noise.

CHAPTER VIII

THE PURSUIT

WE led the horses around; Jim in the lead with Black Carl, but when he reached the opening in the wall, Jim's horse pulled back violently, almost knocking me over. Jim yanked at his head and slapped his flank, but he would not budge. It did seem as if there was no end to the obstacles which we met.

"Hold on, Jim," I said, "let me have the lead. My horse is gentler and has got better sense than that old black beast."

"I believe he has," said Jim, who was disgusted.

I took Bill firmly by the bridle and though he put his ears forward and stepped gingerly, he went right through and Carl followed after him rather than be left behind.

Just then my horse stepped on a board across a ditch and it snapped with a report like a pistol.

There was an immediate alarm in the shanty and we saw a light struck and heard the sound of hoarse voices and oaths.

"Hurry up with that axe, Jim, and cut the fence,

we haven't any time to lose." Jim was soon hacking violently at the barb wire but it was too tough. Then he swung at a post with all his might and broke it off near the ground. Then he held the wires down until I got over and I did the same for him.

At last we were free and swung into the saddle. What if the stirrups were long. It was just in time for the horse thieves swarmed out of the shanty angry as bees.

We put our horses to the run. It was no use trying to conceal ourselves any longer. We were now in the open.

As we charged up the hill, several rifle shots rang out and z-z-zing went the bullets over our heads. Our horses, thoroughly frightened, were going at top speed. Before another round was fired we were beyond the hurt of danger and safe on the other side of the ridge.

Unslinging his rifle, Jim dismounted.

"Another shot and those fellows would have got us, they don't miss more than once, even on a dark night. Here, Jo, hold the horses and give them a chance to blow. I am going to take a look over the ridge."

He went back a few paces and I could see him as he crouched like a shadow on the top of the hill, then suddenly he brought his rifle to his shoulder

and fired, then three times in rapid succession, and there was no uncertainty in his aim.

"Well, what was it?" I asked as he hurried back.

"Two of them running up the hill, but I stopped them all right."

"Did you hit any of them?" I inquired, eagerly.

"I guess not, but I made them stop and think. I allowed for shooting down hill and I bet I gave them some dust instead of singing the bullets over their heads."

"We had better be moving, Jim," I urged.

"All right, let the horses cut out now for several miles and the next time we stop we will fix those stirrups."

Neither of us will ever forget that exhilarating ride over the prairies in the darkness. Our horses were fresh and the very uncertainty of the ground under the animals' feet made it more exciting. Then, too, we had won out on this terribly trying night and we felt somewhat proud of ourselves. I hardly think you can blame us very much either.

"Ain't this great," yelled Jim to me. "I bet the boys at home would like to be in our boots."

"Once is enough for me," I yelled back, "I don't need so much continuous excitement."

"Oh, you are dead slow," replied Jim.

"Maybe I am slow, but my horse isn't."

Taking this as a challenge, he urged Black Carl

ahead of me and got a length in the lead before I could hold him, then I let Billy out and he fairly flew and in half a mile he was twenty feet ahead.

Then I saw a gully in front of me and pulled in with all my might. Bill stopped with his front feet knocking dirt into the ravine. Jim had plenty of time.

"Why didn't you take it?"

"Take what?" I asked.

"Why, the jump, of course, it's only ten feet wide."

"That's ten too wide for me," I said. "Let's rest the horses now and fix the stirrups. I'm tired of riding on the horn. Do you suppose those fellows will follow us?"

"Of course they will," Jim replied, "but it will take them a half hour at least to find where their traps are and get things fixed."

"I don't see what they can do," I said, "their saddles and bridles are done for."

"Well, they will rig up some sort of rope bridle. You needn't think they are going to let us off as easy as this. They won't do a thing to us if they catch us." This was a discouraging view of affairs.

"They won't take us alive, that's certain," I said, looking back apprehensively, to see if there were any mounted men showing on the skyline.

"It's a little too soon to see them," remarked

Jim. "We have made fine time and we can take it a little slower now. I wonder how Tom and the Missourian are getting along.

"It's funny," I said, "but we have n't thought of Tom till just now. I suppose we had so much else on our minds."

"This is a lot more comfortable with the stirrups shortened," remarked Jim. "It gives you a better purchase and you can feel the horse under you."

We rode on in silence for some time, beginning to feel the reaction from the long spell of excitement. I must have drowsed off as we rode along, for I awakened with a start.

"Why, it's light," I exclaimed, but it was not daylight. The moon was rising and radiating the plains with its clear splendor.

"No sign of those fellows yet," I said, looking back where everything looked clear and peaceful as far as the horizon.

"I am afraid that their horses are faster than ours," said Jim. "Those bronchos have lots of speed and they don't tire either."

"We can't be more than two miles from the creek," I said. "Isn't that the line of trees we see over there?"

"It looks like it was," replied Jim. "If we once get there we can stand them off, even if there was a dozen."

Something made me look around just then.

"There they come!" I exclaimed; there were three men coming rapidly down the slope behind us.

"Now for it," yelled Jim, and we made our horses fairly fly. But in spite of all we could do they were gaining on us, but still they must have been a couple of miles behind, but they were coming like mad. Our horses were tiring fast, for they were not used to such strenuous work. At last we reached the shadow and shelter of the cottonwoods, but we were still five miles from camp, with no chance of reaching it.

Either we must make our stand here or escape by some stratagem that would throw the desperadoes off the trail.

"We have five minutes to spare at least," said Jim, "before those fellows get here, and we will have to do something quick." He thought for a moment.

"There's the island over there, it might help us."

"Let's cross over and hide in the brush," I said.

"That won't do, they will see from our horses' tracks where we crossed."

"Can't we hide them someway?" I asked.

"We'll try. Follow me. There is a board against that tree, just what I want," and riding up

the bank of the stream for a short distance, he laid the board, which was almost twelve feet long and heavy, so that one end sloped into the water. Then he walked Black Carl, who was docile enough by this time, down into the stream and I followed.

Jim next lifted the board and pulled it into the stream and we rode splashing down the middle of the creek, the horses sending the water in big drops around and over us. It was refreshing after our long, hard ride.

In a minute we had reached the end of the island and rode into the security of the trees and heavy bushes just in time, as the horse thieves dashed into the shadow of the trees, sure that they would capture us soon.

"Here's where they went, Bill," yelled a voice which we recognized as Cal Jenkins, "follow their trail and see where they crossed the creek." After a careful search he gave it up.

"It's no use, Boss, the trail stops here," and Cal Jenkins, with all his fuming and growling, could do no better.

They spent some time working back and forth and then gave it up.

"It's getting daylight, Cal," we heard one of them say, "and we'll have to leave. It won't be healthy for us around here long after sunrise."

"I'll get even with those cursed kids yet," we heard him growl, as he rode off. We were to ~~run~~ across his trail again, but not in this chapter of our lives.

CHAPTER IX

AT CAMP AGAIN

WE waited until they had disappeared entirely before we ventured out of our island retreat.

"It won't be long until sunrise now," said Jim, "we will be in time to have breakfast with Tom."

"Let's take it easy for the rest of the way," I said, "I have had enough exercise to last me for awhile."

"Gee! but I'm sleepy," admitted Jim, stretching his arms almost out of their sockets, "the bunks for me when we get back to camp."

We rode slowly up the bank of the creek, the birds were chirping in the boughs of the cottonwoods and the stream running brightly through the sunshine and the shadow.

It was certainly a beautiful morning, but somehow it seemed different from any morning within our experience, because we had been up for a couple of nights and had gone through so much.

"Hello, there's the camp," I cried as I caught sight of a piece of white canvas through the trees. I wonder where Tom is. I don't see any sign of

him." Evidently he had heard our voices, for he rushed out of the tent.

"Hurrah!" he yelled, "you've got the horses." This brought "Missouri" out and he waved his hat and yelled too. We thought it was his sense of humor till we found that he and Tom had become regular chums.

"Howdy, boys," he said, graciously, shaking us by the hand. "Did you get my terbacker?"

"Sorry, 'Missouri,' but your old pal, Cal Jenkins, was so fussy," I said, "when he found that we had got the horses from under his nose, that we didn't dare mention the subject." "Missouri" grinned.

"He's a perticular old gent and hates to lose any horses when he's collected them himself."

"Let's have breakfast," Tom said. "Come on, 'Missouri.'"

"I can always eat something without being propped up with pillows. And Tommy is a good cook," I added.

We had our breakfast outside in the shade of a big cottonwood, as the tent was getting pretty hot. The bill of fare was fried potatoes, bacon, coffee and cakes, the kind of meal you pay a dollar for on a dining car in these degenerate days, and we had enough so that it was a real breakfast and not an appetizer. As we ate our breakfast we told of

our experience at the Jenkins ranch, and every once in a while "Missouri" would throw his head back and laugh.

"I wonder what Cal said when he found the horses gone and his saddles missing. I bet the air was bluer than indigo around those diggin's. Lucky he didn't catch you little rascals, he would have skinned you alive."

"We heard him say that he would get even with us," I said.

"I wouldn't stay around these parts longer than necessary, if I was you boys," he warned, "because if Cal once gets it in for anybody, he'll follow them and get even somehow, that's his style."

After we were through Tom told us his interesting narrative, so we didn't have all the fun ourselves.

"Well, boys, I'm sorry to leave you, but the best of friends must part. I would be obliged to you Tommy, if you would let me have my gun."

We looked doubtful at this, but Tom agreed. It was all right too, because "Missouri" was friendly.

"You can take it, 'Missouri,' because you might be lonesome on the prairie without it."

"You're A1, Tommy, I won't forget you-uns and if I cut Cal Jenkins' trail, war will break loose. Goodbye, boys," he said, giving us each a hearty handshake, and he slouched off down the creek,

and his big frame was soon lost sight of among the trees. We were to see him again, but not in Kansas, and only after many exciting months had gone.

"He isn't a bad fellow and he has had a hard life," said Tom. "His parents were dead poor, and did not have anything but children. So he had to earn his living ever since he could walk and he got into bad company."

"I think we had better move on this morning," said Jim, "after the horses get rested and have a good feed."

We all agreed and it did not take us long to strike the tent, for we were expert at that and soon had everything packed neatly in the wagon and were ready to move as soon as the horses had finished.

"I'm going to do a little fishing," I said. "Maybe I can't shoot but I can catch fish."

"I'm going to clean the guns," said Jim.

I left him putting a high polish on his rifle which was his especial pride. He was never happier than when he was working over it. As for Tom, he lay in the shade of a tree reading a story of the wild west.

"Humph!" he criticised, "if the fellow who wrote this had had a live 'pointer' tree him, he would have had something to talk about."

I took my jointed bamboo rod, of which I was just as proud as Jim was of his rifle, and went up

the creek for a half mile, where I found a deep pool across which a cottonwood tree had fallen. There I sat, throwing my line into the water, which was beautifully clear, and with a pebbly bottom. This was one of the few clear streams we ran across in Kansas. I had a conical float of green painted wood and every once in a while it would give a little bob as though a fish were nibbling at the bait and I waited anxiously for the pull that would yank it below the surface. The water was so clear that I could see the fish swimming around in the pool. At first they paid no attention to the bait.

There was one big fellow I wanted especially. He must have been eighteen inches long. He swam lazily around and I gently brought the hook to his attention. He swam around it from all sides and then as another fish came along, he went for the bait, I gave a sudden pull, then, though he fought, I threw him flopping on the bank. In an hour's time I had captured three and I went back to camp with my prizes.

"What kind of fish are these?" asked Jim. "I never saw any like them back east."

"I don't know, but I reckon they will be good eating," I replied.

"I bet they are full of bones," said Tom.

"Not any more bones than your old grouse had,"

I retorted, "and they won't be so tough, either." The meal was soon prepared and over.

"It's time to hitch up, boys," said Jim, and we soon got the horses into the harness and pulled out of the camp which we would always have cause to remember.

"It's nice to be traveling again," I said. "I wonder what adventure we will run into next. I have been reading a book about some fellows who found a lost mine in Colorado. They had hard times I tell you, and had to fight to keep it. I wonder if we will have any luck finding a mine. I hope we strike it rich."

"We stand as good a chance as anybody else," Jim said, "and we will likely get in with some old prospector who knows the ropes."

"I ain't worrying about any mines now," I said. "What I want is a good sleep and if Tom drives, I'm going to turn in."

"Me too," said Jim, and we made ourselves comfortable on the bed in the back of the wagon. It seemed fine to lay back there while the horses trotted steadily along and we did not have to bother about anything. The prairie road was not jolty and we were soon lulled to sleep by the regular rumbling of the wagon. Suddenly I was awakened by two rifle shots in rapid succession.

Jim was up in a jiffy and reaching for his rifle

before he was fairly awake. The front of the wagon was full of smoke and Tom was just settling back in the seat.

"I missed him," he said, "but it was a hard shot."

"Missed who?" I inquired. "Cal Jenkins?"

"No, you must have Cal Jenkins on the brain," Tom replied, "it was a band of antelope, about a half mile off. I shot at the big buck in the lead."

"Well if you are going to wake me up, I hope you will hit something next time," growled Jim.

"Anyway," continued Tom, "it was a close call, the first shot kicked the dust this side of him and the next time I fired they were almost out of range. Say do you fellers know that it is about time I had a little sleep? I'm tired of sitting up here and listening to you snoring."

"All right, Tom," I said, "I'll take the wheel for this watch," and I climbed over into the front seat, took the reins and called back:

"It's my turn to get the antelope."

"We would starve on the antelope you'd shoot," said Tom, witheringly.

"Never mind, little boy, you go right to sleep," I said, "and when it's time for your bottle I will wake you up."

"You make me tired," said Tom, as he threw himself on the bed.

"You will sleep all the better," I said. "Get up, Carl; get up, Bill," and we trotted steadily off.

The face of the country had changed considerably while I had been asleep and was somewhat more rolling and broken. I kept a sharp outlook for antelope, but all I saw was a band of them feeding on a rise several miles to the north. They lifted their heads and looked at the wagon and then resumed their grazing.

CHAPTER X

THE BULLY

WE jogged along for about an hour and I was beginning to get drowsy, when I saw a sight that waked me up, it was not so exciting, but it was not pleasant.

I was driving down a slope into a shallow, sandy basin, which was one large prairie dog town, with hundreds of the little mounds and the prairie dogs sitting up straight and stiff like sticks, by the holes, then quickly they would sit down on all fours and wag their short little tails as fast as lightning, then disappear down their holes like a flash.

But what attracted my attention were grayish piles at short distances along the side of the road.

At first I did not know what they were, but discovered they were dead rattlesnakes, that had been killed by travelers along this road. You see that these snakes make their home with the prairie dogs, and small owls completed the happy but peculiar family. The snakes crawl out in the sunshine and lay torpid so that they were easily killed.

Late as it was in the afternoon there were hundreds of the rattlesnakes lying around. Some of them were stretched sluggishly across the road, the dust of which was marked by the trails of their bodies. One big fellow, about six feet in length, was directly in the middle of the road.

I jumped down and took the heavy end of the blacksnake to him. He came for me, his head partially raised and his fanged mouth open. I jumped down to one side and hit him back of the head and stunned him, while he thrashed his body furiously in the dust of the road, another blow finished him for good, and I cut off his rattles as a memento. He must have been thirteen years old.

When I climbed into the wagon the boys were still sleeping sweetly and I decided not to disturb them. It was now time to make camp and I drove on rapidly looking for some place where I could find water.

Driving on for about a mile I crossed over into a board low valley, where there was plenty of water, as was shown by the green along the borders of a narrow, meandering stream.

"Come, boys, wake up!" I cried, "we've got to make camp," and they sat up, rubbed their eyes and looked at the landscape.

"There's a farm! Let's camp near that," said Tom; "and we can get fresh milk and butter."

There was also something else which we had not counted on, but it was a small matter in a way, but very disagreeable too. We made our camp near the road and about a quarter of a mile from the farm.

I said if the boys would put up the horses and raise the tent, I would go to the house and get the provisions.

"All right, but hurry up," said Tom, "because we are mighty hungry."

I found a very nice old lady in the kitchen, who gave me a pail of milk and a pound of sweet, yellow butter.

"Where are you boys from," she asked, and when I told her, she exclaimed, "Laws sakes! What are your folks thinking of to let you come way out here and going to Colorado too, where the Injuns will be sure to scalp you."

"We aren't afraid of them, ma'am," I replied.

"Well you had better look out for the mosquitoes to-night, they are worse than Injuns. They will almost eat you and your horses up."

It was getting dusk when I returned towards the camp and I had just stepped into the road, when a big husky boy came up to me. He must have been about eighteen, heavy and strongly built. He stepped right across my path.

"Hello," I said, "ain't it a beautiful evening."

"You darn milksop," he said, "I'll show you whether it is a beautiful evening. What ye're doing around here anyway, you darn tenderfoot."

"Excuse me, for living," I said, backing across the road and keeping a wary eye on him. I knew he was looking for trouble and I set the pail down just in time, when he rushed at me, swinging his arms awkwardly, but with lots of strength.

I wouldn't have wanted him to strike me with those big fists of his. As he rushed at me I sidestepped and hit him a clip in the jaw that made him furious. This time I met him low in a tackle that every boy who has played football knows, and sent him sprawling over my head and he struck on his shoulder.

I let him get up which was foolish of me, but pride often goes before instruction. As he came for me the third time, I stepped back, intending to give the farmer an uppercut that he would long remember, when I hit the back of my heel against a big stone and fell over, the big farmer boy on top of me.

I protected my face as well as I could with my arms, and tried to get my leg around his and turn him over but he was too big and strong and was doing his level best to choke me, and had got a pretty good hold on my ear with his teeth. That's what I got for being too smart. It looked as if I

was going to get pretty well done up. Then I heard somebody running down the road.

"Come on, Tom," Jim yelled, "some fellow is doing Jo up." In a second Jim had my new found friend around the neck and yanked him into the middle of the road, while Tom was twisting his leg.

"Quit it, boys," I said, "don't hurt him," for I knew it would be bad for the farmer if they tried any tricks on him.

"Let's have some fun with him," cried Jim. Then Jim and Tom together yanked him to his feet, and he was indeed a comical object with his shock head of hair sticking up and his fat round face red as a beet. I went to the fence and picked up a piece of board.

"Now, Johnny," I said, "I'm going to give you a good spanking because your mama didn't teach you to be polite when you were little."

Jim and Tom fell into the spirit of the occasion with great rapidity. Jim held him over his knees with his head down, while Tom sat on his legs. Remembering the hold he had got on my ear, I whacked him good and hard over the seat of his overalls with the board.

"Now be a good boy and don't kick," urged Jim, "you know it's for your own good and it pains

papa very much, to have to punish you, doesn't it papa?"

"You bet it does," I said, giving him another resounding whack, "and I guess it pains him too." Then he began to blubber.

"Quit it, yer darn fool, your hurtin' me. My big brother will kill you fellars. Boo-hoo."

"Gee! think of that," said Jim, "he's got a brother bigger than he is. We had better look out." The fellow rose to the bait.

"You'll be sorry for this when he gets ahold of you." Then we gave him the merry laugh.

"We'll spank your brother too, if he ain't a good boy," Tom said, consolingly.

"Now," I said, "I won't spank you any more if you will say you are sorry. Let him up, Jim."

This was done. Tom and Jim stood on either side of him with a hand on either shoulder, like policemen, while I confronted the culprit.

"Say it," I commanded. He gulped "I'm sorry." Jim took out a grimy handkerchief and wiped his tears tenderly away from his fat, red face.

"He's sorry, papa, don't whip him any more."

"I won't, if he will say, 'I'll be a good boy and not bite anybody's ears off when they are littler than I am.'"

"I will be a good boy," he snivelled, "and I won't

bite anybody's ears off when they are littler than I am."

"Let him go now," I said, "he will be good."

"Not by a darn sight," said Tom, who was hard-hearted at times, a regular prosecuting attorney. "I bet he's bullied all the little boys and girls at the district school until they are as afraid as death of him."

"Who told you that," inquired the rube, "it must have been Jem Smith." We laughed at this innocent give-away.

"Nobody need tell me anything about that," said Tom, severely, "anybody with half an eye can see what you are. You are just like a fellow we had at school, named Will Greer. He was certainly a bad one. I think the best thing to do with him boys, is to drown him," and he gave Jim and me the wink and with Jim and Tom pulling and I shoving behind for all I was worth, we got the protesting victim to the edge of the creek.

"Oh, don't drown me, please don't drown me," he pleaded, but Tom was obdurate.

"Have you any last words to send home," he inquired, solemnly.

"Here, let me cut a lock of his yellow hair," said Jim, sentimentally. "You are somebody's darlin', ain't you, sonny."

"Yes, I'm **Mame** Smith's," he cried.

"What's her address?" inquired Jim, soothingly.

"Oh, don't drown me," he pleaded, getting down on his knees. "Mame will never get over it."

"Neither will you," said the hard-hearted Tom, and with a united shove we sent him head-first into the creek, which was not over three feet deep at the most. Then he crawled on the bank like a half-drowned rat.

"Now, that will do," said Tom officially, "and if we ever hear of you abusing any of the kids at the District School again, you will get something worse than this, you understand."

"Yes, sir," he whimpered, meekly.

"Don't you make any trouble about this or come around the camp with any of your gang to-night, to get even," cautioned Tom, because if you do we will kill you."

"I jest want to get home, that's all," he whined.

"Well, go," we said in chorus, "and good luck to you."

CHAPTER XI

THE QUICKSANDS

"Do you think he will fetch his big brother and ring us up this evening?" I asked.

"Shucks. No! We won't hear from him again," said Tom.

This proved to be true, but we were not to be entirely free from disturbance, for what the old lady had said about the mosquitoes was perfectly correct. We had never seen anything like it. Poor Bill and Black Carl were eaten up with them and their hides were bloody where they had been bitten.

"I am not going to see those horses tormented this way," said Jim, and he started a smudge back of the horses' heels. Unfortunately he got the fire too close to Bill's tail and that ornament caught fire. In frantic haste Tom threw a pail of water on him and the flame went out, but there was a strong smell of burning hair in the vicinity, and Bill's beauty was quite spoiled. When we undertook to eat our supper, the mosquitoes settled on our hands and faces so that we could not eat, and the only way was to stand in the smoke of the fire.

"I don't care for smoked beef," remarked Jim, as we took a bite of meat. This certainly is fierce."

"What do you think, Jo," said Tom, "when you went to the ranch house for the milk, I took the shotgun and went after some ducks on the creek, and when I tried to get a bead on them the mosquitoes settled so thick on the barrel that I couldn't see the sights."

"Humph!" I said, "that's a good one. Do you take me for a tenderfoot?"

"It's so, just the same," rejoined Tom, "ain't it, Jim?"

"Of course it is," replied Jim, "you tell that to the folks back east and they would give you the laugh, the same as Jo. What's the use of having experience if people won't believe you when you tell them?" In this question Jim proposed a problem we did not attempt to solve.

There was no use of standing around to be admired by the mosquitoes, so we turned in for the night.

"I hope we won't have any more disturbances," I remarked, "because I want to get a square night's sleep for once."

"You don't think about anything except snoozing," jeered Tom. "I never saw such a fellow."

"People with active minds have to have rest," I replied and with this shot, I left Tom and Jim to the

mosquitoes and went to sleep in the wagon. The dog, Ben, curled up in front, was the only comfortable member of our party, because his hair was so thick, the mosquitoes could make no impression on him.

I pulled the blankets over my head and went to sleep, but if I dreamed of unbroken slumbers, I was to be disappointed. About two o'clock in the morning I was awakened by a terrible noise and I looked out of the front of the wagon.

It was a perfectly black night, overcast without a star shining. Ben had jumped out of the wagon and had run into the darkness barking furiously. Then I heard the sound again, like a long drawn wail, like someone in terrible trouble. Next came a succession of short, sharp barks, followed by that prolonged howl.

"What is it?" I asked of the other two boys, who had come out of the tent.

"I thought it was you snoring," remarked Jim, "it sounded considerable like it."

"Oh, did it," I replied, "you and Tom don't need to talk."

Then came that awful racket again.

"It must be some sort of a wild animal," said Tom, "maybe it's a wildcat."

"Wildcats don't go like that," I said.

Just then Ben began to yell and yelp and we ran

as fast as we could in the direction the cries came from. When we got near him we saw an animal of some kind slink away in the darkness. We fired a half dozen shots but probably did not come within a hundred yards of him. We found Ben pretty badly used up. Both ears had been chewed and he was bleeding. We took him to the wagon and fixed him up the best we could.

"Maybe it was another dog," said Tom.

"I never heard a dog with the delirium tremens who could make a racket like that," I said.

We found out after we had traveled into Kansas a little further, what it was that had disturbed us that night. It was just one lone, ordinary, mangy coyote, and we saw a good many of them on our travels, but we managed to kill only one out of the whole lot. They are so thin and shadowy that it is almost impossible to hit one and they are pretty foxy and know enough to keep out of range.

The next morning we were up bright and early and were glad to strike the road and to get out of that valley of the mosquito. For several days we traveled along without further adventure, but the plains became wilder and lonelier the farther west we went.

"I wonder what those little hollows we see every once in a while are?" I asked one day. Jim thought it over for awhile.

"I know," he said, "those are buffalo wallows, where the bison used to come and roll with their big humps where the ground is soft."

We saw quite a number of them, often with reeds growing around them and forming shallow pools of water after a rain. Occasionally from these little ponds we used to flush a flock of ducks.

There were also the narrow trails where thousands of these American bison had gone in single file across the plains to new feeding grounds or to the river to get water. It was not so long ago when the prairies where we were now driving were covered with them. Finally in our travels we came to the Arkansas river.

"I don't know how we are going to get across this stream," I said.

"It looks shallow, even if it is a half mile across," said Jim. "I guess we can cross it all right."

This looked reasonable for the river was made up of shallow streams running between bars of mud and sand and silt.

"I don't know what it is, but I'm afraid of that old Arkansas," I said.

"Oh, you are always afraid of something," laughed Jim.

Tom said nothing, but seemed to be affected by some sort of a premonition. Finally we came to what looked like a ford and while we were hesi-

tating, we saw a white covered wagon coming in the distance.

"Let's wait until these people come up," said Tom, "perhaps they know more about this river than we do."

"Good idea," assented Jim; "you sometimes have a good idea in your head."

So we waited and in about a half an hour they came toiling along the road. There were two men, evidently prospectors, going west on the same errand we were.

"Well, kids, what are you waiting for?" they asked, "do you think somebody is going to build you a bridge to cross over?"

"No, we were waiting for you to come up, because we thought you might know more about the river than we did," Tom said.

"We ain't going to wait here, that's sartain," the driver replied, "somebody will get ahead of us and stake that mine we're looking for in Colorady. If you kids are afraid, we will take the chance."

"Yes, we are afraid," said Tom quietly.

"Goodbye, boys," we will see you later," and they drove down the bank into the river. The horses seemed afraid and went gingerly along, humping themselves and jumping sideways with fear.

All went well until they had gone about a hun-

dred yards from the bank when the trouble began. The horses began to flounder and the two men beat them and shouted in panic, the further they got the worse it was. The wagon and horses sank deeper at every floundering step. We stood petrified by the horrible fascination of the sight.

CHAPTER XII

THE RUNAWAY

"HELP! Help!" the men cried in terror.

"Why don't they get out and walk back. It's their only chance," said Tom.

This they were preparing to do. The driver stepped out on the hub of the wagon, which was now almost level with the treacherous shifting sand. The poor horses had given up all effort and were sinking slowly down.

The man stepped into the shallow water and instantly began to go down and as he pulled one leg partially out the other leg was submerged in the sand up to the knee. With a powerful wrench he twisted toward the wagon and throwing the upper part of his body forward he caught a spoke of the front wheel. Struggling frantically, he slowly and painfully pulled himself to the wheel and with the help of his partner, he got into the wagon but what a sorry refuge it was, for it was only a question of time before the whole wagon top and all would sink out of sight forever, swallowed by the hungry and insatiable sand. Already it was up to the bed

of the wagon. There seemed nothing for us to do but to stand there helpless and see the men go down before our eyes.

"What shall we do?" I cried, "we can't let them drown." But if they had been upset far out in the ocean we could not have seemed more helpless as far as furnishing them aid was concerned.

"There must be some boards around here," said Jim.

We looked hurriedly about, in the hope of finding something we could lay our hands on, but there was nothing but the river on one side and a grassy plain on the other and no house in sight.

"You would not find a board or anything like it in this part of Kansas," remarked Tom.

"They will sink out of sight right before our eyes," I exclaimed, "let's wade out to them anyway."

"Don't be a fool, Jo," said Tom. "What good would that do? You would just go down yourself." Then Tom suddenly put his hands to his lips thus making a funnel to carry his words.

"Throw out everything in your wagon," he yelled, "and it won't sink so fast."

"That's a good scheme, Tom," said Jim, "as the men began to throw out bedding, tools, sacks of provisions, etc.

"You see the body of the wagon won't go down

as fast as the wheels and the running gear," said Tom, "especially when she is lightened by getting the truck out of her, and it will give us time to help."

"Say, boys, come on, I have a scheme that might work," said Jim, and he ran to the wagon and got out the lariat ropes that we used for the horses.

"That's the idea," exclaimed Tom, "now tie them together."

This we did and it made quite a stretch of rope, though whether it would be long enough was open to question. Still we could but try. So taking off our shoes, socks and pants, we started to wade out to the rescue.

At no place was it over a foot in depth and the footing was mud in some places, in others it was sand. We followed as closely as we could the line taken by the wagon but it was guess work in a way for the shifting sands had erased all marks of the unfortunate wagon's wheels.

I got quite a scare for I got a little to one side of the firm ground and began to go down with one foot. Never shall I forget the sensation of helpless fear as I began to sink.

"Don't struggle," yelled Tom to me. "Here, catch this rope," and I held on for dear life, as they pulled me out, the heavy sucking sand clinging and holding me back but at last they pulled me into

comparative solid footing. We ventured as near as we dared to the wagon. Tom had tested the sand ahead and found that we could go no further.

"All ready now, catch this rope," Tom yelled to the man standing in the back of the wagon. We could see the other man back of him, swilling some liquor down from a black bottle.

"Hold on!" commanded Tom, "if you don't drop that bottle we will leave you. We can't do anything with a drunken man."

"All right, Pard," he assented and shoved the bottle into his back pocket for further reference. Tom now threw the rope towards the man, but it fell short. What were we to do.

"Have you any rope in the wagon?" yelled Jim.

"Nary bit," replied the fellow, "we threw everything out. Hain't you got any more?"

"No we haven't," replied Tom. "I tell you what you do, cut the reins and throw them to us."

"All right, captain," replied the man and he lost no time in doing as he was told. Tying the heavy leather into a ball he threw it to us without any difficulty. I caught it on the fly and then came another question. How were we to fix the leather and the rope together so that it would hold the weight of the men.

"We haven't a knife or anything," said Jim, starting to feel in his pockets only to find that he had no pants on.

"You will have to run back, Jo," said Tom, "because you have the most speed, and get a knife and you will find a piece of wire in the grub chest."

I started back as fast as I could go for the bank, the water splashing from my feet and it was pretty near a record for a hundred yards, in that part of Kansas. I struck one soft spot but I made extra time and got over safely. I got what was ordered and flew back, not taking more than a minute for the round trip. Tom took his knife and made a slit in the leather, through which the rope was put and tied, then wired to make it more secure.

"Now we are all ready," said Tom, and with a strong throw he sent the rope towards the man in the back of the wagon. It went a little wide. "Here, Jo," commanded Tom, "you try your hand."

The wagon had now sunk half way down in the sand. I was determined to justify my ability in accuracy and it was an appropriate time. So I poised myself and made a cast with the rope, perhaps my experience in throwing a fish line helped me. At least the first throw went direct into the

back of the wagon and the man caught it. He tied it under his arms and climbed into the water.

"Lay flat down," directed Tom.

He did as he was told and all three of us pulled strong and steadily, so that gradually we got him to the comparatively safe sand. His partner, the man with the bottle, gave us more trouble because he was under the influence of liquor. His head went down into the water the first thing, which brought him partially to his senses, and he floundered through the mud and water like an awkward flapping turtle. At last we got him onto terra firma, at least as firma as the river afforded.

They were sorry looking objects indeed, dripping with water and thoroughly muddy. As for the horses, the poor unfortunate creatures who were straining to hold their heads above the muddy water, there was only one thing to do.

It was Jim's work, because he was a really fine shot. Just as he fired the last bullet we heard a racket behind us and there our team was streaking across the prairie, the wagon rattling and jouncing behind them.

What possessed them we could not guess, for they had always been perfectly docile and well broken to shooting. But horses are peculiar creatures and very sensitive sometimes to anything unusual in their surroundings. No doubt the strug-

gling animals in the river and the quick shots were too much for them.

However, it was a condition and not a theory that we had to deal with. It was a bad condition, too, for we were miles from any ranch. We did not know the country and had nothing but our rifles with us.

We were thoroughly frightened and rushed out of the river yelling "whoa," "whoa," at the top of our voices. It would have been very quick, quick sands that would have held us back. Without stopping to put on our clothes, we started on a great cross country run, our shirt tails waving in the breeze. I being the fastest, was considerably in the lead, striding out in great shape, but the horses had too great a handicap, and I had not covered over two hundred yards when the wagon bounced high over a distant ridge and disappeared, the white of the cover like the flash of an antelope's tail. I glanced back and the rest of the field was strung out, with Tom in the rear bringing our clothes, while the two ex-prospectors stood on the bank shouting in great glee at the sport and no doubt making wagers on the result.

My wind did not fail me, as I was in fine condition, hard as nails, and if I had been on the track I could not have been more lightly clad for

the occasion. When I reached the ridge I looked into the distance, expecting to see the white wagon on the edge of the horizon, but not a speck or a sail could I see. Then I looked down the long slope, and wonderful to relate, but it is absolutely true, there was the wagon not over a quarter of a mile away at a full stop. Slightly careened to one side but apparently all right and the horses were still hitched to it. But what had stopped them, I could not guess.

I knew very well that the two crazed and frightened horses would never stop of their own accord, not till they had killed themselves or broken their legs.

But I did not tarry to guess about the matter, but waving to Jim and Tom, I hip-hopped down the slope as fast as I could, for I now realized how sore my feet were. Coming up with the runaways, I found that the front wheels were wedged into a little gully not more than five feet across, while the back wheels were canted up on the other side.

Nothing seemed to have been broken and there they were, captured as neat as you please. I did not fall on the horses' necks and weep at our sudden and unexpected reunion, but I gave them as severe a licking as I dared under the circumstances, for the fright they had given us, while Ben jumped around and barked in great excitement.

Tom and Jim soon came tearing down the hill, also like a pair of runaways, for they could not get to the scene too soon.

"Well, of all lucky things," panted Jim, "if this doesn't beat me."

And for about five minutes all we could do was to exclaim over our wonderful luck.

But to this day none of us can think of the runaway without a sinking of the heart, when we recall how we felt when we first caught sight of that team streaking across the prairie, the big wagon swaying and jouncing behind them.

It did not take us long to get the wagon out and we made the horses travel on our way to the river where we were to camp. Tom drove, while Jim and I spent the time examining our feet and picking out the more prominent cacti thorns. As for the prospectors, we did not see them. But we were to meet them again in a short time under circumstances that we could not have possibly foreseen.

CHAPTER XIII

WE MEET A FRIEND

WHEN we woke up the next morning the broad Arkansas River was still between us and our line of travel.

"How in the mischief, Tom, are we going to get across this river?" I asked. "We can't build a bridge, because there isn't any lumber."

"No, there is not enough lumber, even to make a boat," said Jim.

"What good would a boat be in a river like this, that's half mud and sand?" said Tom. "There is just one thing for us to do, and that is to keep moving until we strike a bridge. No fords for us!"

(Perhaps the boy who is reading these lines is more ingenious than we were and could have thought of a scheme to get across the river, but we could not.)

"That's right," said Jim, "what might be a good ford one day, would be bad the next, because the sands shift so."

Accordingly, we hitched up and drove on up the river until about noon. At that time I was

stationed on the bridge on the front seat, doing the driving, when I saw something that made me bring the team to a halt. Tom and Jim were lolling in the back of the wagon.

"Hello, boys," I said, "what's that dark line ahead of us up the creek?"

Tom put his hand to his forehead and peered into the distance, his eyes were as sharp as a sailor's, anyway.

"That," he finally announced, is what we have been looking for, it's the bridge."

"Hurrah," we yelled in chorus, for we did not wish to spend the remainder of our lives on the south side of the Arkansas River.

In about an hour we came to the approach of the bridge. There was nothing imposing about the structure, but it suited us all right. It looked to be a half mile long, was built of wood, with sides of boards about five feet in height and was supported by piles driven into the ground. The bridge was so narrow that only one team could cross at a time, but there was no great traffic in that part of Kansas, so we started across without fear of meeting anybody. Jim looked down at the river as we were crossing over and shook his fist. "You won't get us this time, darn your old hide!"

Jim was always something of an orator and was apt to get wrought upon occasion.

"Why don't you speak 'Horatius at the Bridge,' Jim?" I said, "you know you are the Boy Orator of Watkins Creek (a local stream near our old home).

This riled Jim because he took himself seriously, when it came to public speaking, and besides "Regulus to the Carthagenians," to which reference has been made, his repertoire also included Cicero's remarks on Cataline or Kickero. We had not yet reached the unhappy stage where we had to translate Cicero's remarks to the "Conscript Fathers" from the Latin into chaste and accurate English that takes all the oratory out of it.

Now I began to spout this chestnut: "What's banished but set free? Freed from the chains I loathe." This I did in Jim's most oratorical manner and he immediately began to lambast me with a pillow and we rolled over and over on the bed in the back of the wagon.

"Hold on, there," we heard Tom yell, but he was not speaking to us and we stopped our scraping and looked out of the front of the wagon. We saw a farmer just driving his wagon up the incline of the bridge.

We were two-thirds of the way across and he had to back down, which he managed to do. He was somewhat riled, but when he saw it was three boys he cheered up and was quite pleasant.

"Fine morning, boys," he said.

"It is that," replied Tom, "sorry to have made you this trouble, but we had the start."

"That's all right; I ought to have been more keeferful, but you don't see many people drivin' in this section of the country. Where are you boys bound for?"

"We are going to Colorado," Tom said, "to try to make our fortune in the gold mines; won't you come along, we would be glad to have you?"

"I guess," the old fellow laughed, "I'll make more money raising cattle and hogs right here in Kansas. It just comes to me that you boys had better camp at my place to-night and my wife will get you a good supper. I guess you won't mind a change of cooks for one evening. It will be kind of nice to get your legs under a table again."

"We would be mighty glad to," we said in chorus, "and much obliged to you."

"That's settled, now I will tell you how you can reach my place. It's twelve miles from here, and that will keep up your average, I guess."

"Yes," said Tom, "that's right, we calculate to make about twenty-five miles a day and we have already gone about a dozen."

"Now I'll show you the way," so he got down from his wagon and began to draw a diagram in the dust while we stood around watching him carefully, while Tom squatted on his haunches, follow-

ing the old man intently, for Tom was somewhat of an authority on ways and means.

"Now you follow this road along the river for six miles until you came to a cross road that runs northwest. There's a shanty with one cottonwood tree near it," and he made two dots in the dust representing the tree and shanty. "You take this road to the right for five miles until you reach a grass road that branches off and at the end of it you come to my place, a one-story cottage with some trees around it. You can't miss it and tell my wife I sent you and it will be all right. I'll be home before evening."

We thanked him as he climbed into his wagon and drove off. We took up the road indicated and after a while we reached the first fork and took the road the old man had said.

There was no trouble so far, but we had a warm discussion when we came to a slightly traveled road that branched off several miles farther on.

"This must be it," I said, for I was doing the driving and I prepared to turn off, but Jim interfered promptly.

"You're daffy," he exclaimed, "this isn't a grass road."

"It looks it to me," I said.

"That's because you have green in your eye."

Tom seized the reins and turned back into the

main road while I subsided into "obscurity in the back of the wagon.

"Here's the grass road, all right," said Tom, after a while.

"There's quite a town over there," I said, and we looked at it with great curiosity for it was a long time since we had seen anything of the sort. It appeared to be a good sized place, with the spires of two churches and a large brick building that was probably the public school.

"I wonder what's the name of it," said Jim.

"Search me," replied Tom, "I never saw it before."

We could now see at the end of the grass road a group of buildings that marked the farm which was our destination. We were glad to see it, for a heavy storm was coming up black from the west, darkening the whole extent of the plains and making them look bleak and desolate.

We felt a little strange and awkward about going to a house where we were not expected. But as soon as the old lady came to the door we felt at home. I speak of her as old, still her hair was not gray, but a plain brown, brushed smoothly, her dress was of gray, old-fashioned and neat. Her form was bent with hard work, but her face was kindly and placid.

"Come in, boys, I am glad you met my hus-

band. We don't have much company and it does seem good to see young folks. Come right in the sitting room and make yourselves at home. I will have my son put your team in the barn."

"I will go out and help him," said Jim.

Tom and I sat in the sitting room, somewhat ill at ease at being inside of a house, for we were something like wild Indians, having been in the open so long. It was a neat little room, with an old time carpet on the floor with a large but not gaudy pattern.

On the walls were two enlarged crayons of Mr. and Mrs. Hoskins, for that was their name, and one of their boys, when he was four years old, in a black suit with wide white collar. On the small table in the center of the room was a big beveled Bible with gilt edges, and on the stand underneath, the family album. I got this out and began to look at the family pictures while Tom sat at the window watching the storm thunder up from the West.

"Here comes Mr. Hoskins," exclaimed Tom, "hurrying to beat the band; let's go out and help him unhitch before the storm strikes," and we rushed out.

"Hello, boys," he said, "I am glad to see you got here all right."

"We couldn't have missed it according to your diagram, Mr. Hoskins," said Tom.

"My wife often makes fun of my drawing directions for folks," he laughed.

We helped him unhitch and got the horses in the barn just in time when the rain came with a sweeping rush borne on gusts of wind. It was a comfortable stable and we were glad to have our horses safe from the storm.

"We will have to run for it," said Mr. Hoskins, and we all made a dash for the house. As we entered there was a good homely smell of cooking, meat and vegetables.

CHAPTER XIV

PLANS FOR THE FOURTH

How we did enjoy that supper, after our month's camping out. There was boiled chicken and real gravy, sweet potatoes and Irish, a big dish of boiled cabbage, generous cups of coffee, and to finish up with a true American pie. Mrs. Hoskins was a good motherly sort of woman and much interested in our travels.

"To think of you boys coming all this way alone; I should think your **mothers** would be terribly worried. Suppose you were taken sick, who would take care of you?"

"We could not get sick, living out of doors, Mrs. Hoskins, it's too healthy," laughed Jim.

"That's right, ma," put in Mr. Hoskins, "If I was ten years younger, I would hitch up the team and we would go to Colorado with the boys and make our fortune in the mines."

"Don't speak of such a thing, Father," she said, "those terrible Indians that are out there. We have suffered enough from those brutes already."

There was a vindictiveness in her voice that was surprising in one so gentle.

"Why, have you seen Indians around here?" Jim asked.

"Yes, when we first came they were all through this country," said Mr. Hoskins, "and sometimes they went on the warpath," and his face grew grim as iron. "I was down the creek after wood one day and my wife was out in the barn for something, when those red devils sneaked around. Our little boy and girl were sleeping in the house and they stole them and burnt the house and I got back just in time to save my wife."

A silence settled down on us and through it I am sure, they felt the sympathy we could not speak. It was one of those terrible tragedies that lie hidden in a family of which nothing is ever said.

"Well," said Tom, finally, "when we get a chance at those Indians, we will help make them pay for that."

"I don't want you boys to feel that way," said Mrs. Hoskins, because it isn't right; perhaps the children are alive — they took them out West —" and there her voice failed her, but the same thought was in all our minds.

"Was there any marks by which the children could be distinguished, Mrs. Hoskins?" asked Tom.

"Little George had the tip of his middle finger cut off," she said.

"It was on the left hand," added Mr. Hoskins.

"Yes," continued Mrs. Hoskins, "and little Mary had an old fashioned coral necklace that used to belong to me when I was a girl."

"We will not forget, Mrs. Hoskins," said Jim, "and perhaps we may find some trace of them in our travels in Colorado."

"God grant it," said Mrs. Hoskins, fervently.

"You boys had better stay here for a few days," said Mr. Hoskins, breaking away from the subject, "and get rested up and have some home cooking. It won't hurt you any."

"We would like it first rate," we said in unison.

"Do stay," urged his wife, "you know we will be glad to have you."

"Yes," put in Will Hoskins, "you fellows stay over the Fourth of July, there is going to be lots of fun in town, foot-races, shooting matches and a baseball game in the afternoon."

"Sure, let's stay," said Jim, with enthusiasm. "I will go in for the shooting match. Jo can enter the running race and maybe get in the baseball game."

"Can you pitch ball?" asked Mr. Hoskins eagerly. "We need a good pitcher; that's where Hughesville has always beaten us. They have got

a pitcher from Missouri and he throws a ball our boys can't hit. Just swipe at it, and the ball runs away from them."

"I know," I said; "that's a curve, they are hard to hit."

Jo is all right when it comes to pitching, Mr. Hoskins," said Tom, "he has got a few curves himself and pitched for our team at school for two years."

"Gee! that will be fine, if we can surprise those Hughesville fellows," said Will Hoskins, "this Fourth of July. Last year they rung in that new fellow on us and beat us bad and their heads are swelled."

"What was the score?" I asked, with interest.

"Fifteen to two," he answered; "it was a bad lickin'."

I looked at Tom, but said nothing.

"I have got to go to town soon," said Mr. Hoskins, "and I will try and fix it with the captain of our team to give you a chance."

"Better put me in for sub," I said, "as I am a stranger, and if the regular pitcher is knocked out, then I can go in the box."

"All right, we'll see how best to arrange it," said Mr. Hoskins.

"You boys must be sleepy," said Mrs. Hoskins, "and I'll fix up your room for you, but I am afraid

one of you will have to sleep on the lounge in the parlor."

"Never mind," Mrs. Hoskins," said Tom, "we are not going to give you any trouble; we have not slept in a house for so long that it would not seem natural."

"But it is storming, so that it won't be very comfortable outside," objected Mrs. Hoskins.

"I tell you what," said Jim, "if you don't mind we can sleep in the barn on the hay. That would suit us fine."

So it was agreed and taking our blankets and a lantern we soon made our beds in the mow and found it mighty comfortable. We could not go to sleep right away for thinking over that attack of the Indians on the defenseless family.

"I tell you what, boys," said Jim. "I am going to keep on the lookout for those children when we get into Colorado. I have a kind of feeling that we may run across them, because these people are too kind and good to lose their children that way."

"I guess that they would rather they were dead," I said, "if we even get a chance to rescue them we will take it even if we run a risk of being skinned alive."

"That's right," said Tom, and then we turned over and went to sleep with the rain beating musically on the shingles over our heads.

We woke up early the next morning and the sun was shining in dusky rays through cracks and crevices into the barn and when we first opened our eyes we did not know where we were.

"My, but it is a fine day," I said; "you feed the horses, Jim, and I will help with the milking," for the latter was one of my few accomplishments.

Mr. Hoskins and Will came out with the shining tin milk pails in their hands.

"How did you boys make out to sleep?" he asked.

"Fine," replied Tom, "but I guess we look like sure enough hay seeds."

"You have got them in your hair a plenty," laughed Will; "better go in, breakfast will be ready soon."

"We are going to help do the chores," I said; "Jim and Tom can look after the horses and I will help you milk."

"Can you milk?" said Mr. Hoskins, surprised, "I thought you were town boys."

"We are," I replied, "but we have lived on a farm. Father thought it was good for us."

"Your father is a sensible man," he said, "you are welcome to try your hand at the milking, because I don't mind a vacation from that."

So I took the pail and went to the cow shed with Will. There were four fine fat cows in the stan-

chions. Two red Durhams, a Jersey and a black and white Holstein.

"Take your choice," said Will. I hesitated for a second, weighing the matter, because I knew that he would try and beat me. "I'll try the Jersey and the Holstein," I said.

He gave me a three-legged stool and I began operations with the Holstein. Will was busily working on the first Durham and the milk was beating a tattoo on the bottom of the pail and then began to foam up. I held my own with him at first, but the Holstein was rather a hard milker, though not slow, and gave a good quantity. I had counted on that, but I knew that she would be gentler than the Reds.

Will finished his first cow and was well on the second when I began to milk the Jersey. Strong as I was, the milking called in play muscles that are not used often, and it was a relief to tackle the Jersey, because her teats were short and I could strip, thus resting my hands. Will was dashing along with both hands, but I was getting along fast myself, and just as he got up with a flourish I had finished.

"Pretty good work," he grinned, "I thought I was going to beat you."

"You nearly did, too," was my reply, "but the Jersey was easy."

"It's time for breakfast," he said, "and I guess you are hungry."

There was no denying it, I was. It was a pretty good breakfast, built on the old fashioned American plan, fried potatoes, griddle cakes, sausages and coffee.

"Did you boys get a good night's rest?" asked Mrs. Hoskins.

"Yes, ma'am, we certainly did," I replied. "We did not know a thing until morning."

CHAPTER XV

WE GO IN TRAINING

AFTER breakfast we went out to practice up for the Fourth of July. We did not have much time to get ready in. But then, we were in pretty good shape; as for running, anybody who had seen us chasing after the runaway team across the plains would have thought we were hard to beat.

"Have you got a baseball, Will?" I asked.

"Sure," he said, "I'll go in and get it."

"We will get things ready while he is gone," proposed Jim.

We put a stone down for a base, or rather home plate. Will took his place ready to wallop them as they came over. Jim was the back stop. While warming up, I sent in a few straight ones and one of them Will knocked over the white picket fence into the grass road. He was evidently much pleased with himself, but did not think much of my skill.

"Here goes for a home run," he said, waving his bat with great vigor, and Jim gave me the wink.

"You certainly are a heavy hitter, Will," I said,

"see what you can do with this," and I put a slow drop over. He whaled away at it and missed by about a foot. He seemed a little surprised, but not discouraged, as he poised for another hit.

"Here goes," he said, "that swallow up there had better look out."

Then the ball came straight to the plate, apparently, and as he whaled away, it curved out and he missed it again.

"Two strikes," counted Jim, and he motioned for a high in-shoot. Will dodged back in considerable alarm.

"Three strikes and out," sung out Jim.

"My goodness, how do you make the ball jump that way?" he asked, in great interest.

"It's a new scheme that the pitchers in the east are just learning to work," I said, and I tried to show him how to throw an out-curve, but he could not make it go at all.

"Needs some practice to get the lay of that," suggested Tom.

Jim took his place at the home plate because he was hungry for a hit and Will got behind several paces to catch the ball on the bound. I had to extend myself, because Jim was an old hand at the game, and knew all my tricks. He missed the first, which was an out, but the next was a drop and he slammed it to the fence. But the next time, as I

was warming up, I struck him out in spite of his best efforts. Will was much impressed by seeing the curves.

"Gee!" he exclaimed, "but you will surprise those fellows from Hughesville, and we are sure to beat them."

After I had pitched for half an hour, I thought that it was enough for one day, as I did not want to get lame.

"Now," said Jim, "the next thing will be a shooting match. What can we use for a target? It has to be pretty big."

"There's an old door," said Will, "how will that do?"

"First rate," said Jim, "and if you had some white paint we could fix a bull's eye."

"There's some whitewash in the barn."

"That will be all right," said Jim, and in a short time we had it fixed up.

"That's first class," cried Will.

"Now," said Jim, "where shall we put it up, because we must be careful, as we don't want to kill any of the stock."

"I know a good place," said Will, "in the lower pasture."

We went down there and it certainly was safe enough for there did not appear to be anything within a hundred miles.

"That tree is the best place for the target," said Jim.

He and Will set it up against the tree and Jim paced off 400 yards. I hid myself in a gully nearby and the shooting began.

Jim's first shot went a little high and to one side, and I indicated the place where it was by flourishing my hat and putting it over the bullet hole. His second shot was good, being in the white circle, about six inches from the center. Out of ten shots, eight were in the circle and the other two close to it.

Jim was no slouch with the rifle. Will did only fair, as he was used to a shotgun. Just as Jim and I and Will were getting a close range view of the target, a big jack rabbit came rubber-legging it across the prairie, about two hundred yards off. I got the first shot and knocked the dust up ahead of him. He swerved toward the right. Jim then drew a bead and fired and Mr. Jack turned two summersaults and then lay still.

"That was a mighty good shot," exclaimed Will.

"There was a lot of luck in it," said Jim. "I couldn't do that every day."

As for my record at the target, the least said the better. But I know that once I knocked some cottonwood leaves off above the target, but I could

really do better at a live object, because in my interest I forgot to be nervous.

The next thing was to do a little sprinting, so we got the tape measure and measured off first a hundred yards and then a quarter of a mile. Jim held the watch, and Will paced me the first two hundred in the quarter and I found I could hold my speed throughout.

"My, but you are fast," he exclaimed.

"It looks to me you are pretty good yourself," I replied.

"I got second in the hundred yards last year," he said.

I thought to myself that we would stand a pretty good chance, but of course, being outsiders, we would naturally get the worst of it.

And they were bound to be hostile to us as being tenderfeet from the East. This ended the exercises for the day as far as the athletics went.

In the afternoon Tom and Jim tinkered around and I took the shotgun for company and started off across the country. I often did this, going alone, for neither Tom or Jim cared to walk except for some definite purpose. But I really enjoyed it, for once in a while I would run across something of interest.

It was a beautiful afternoon and I went off in high spirits even if I was going alone. After I left

the farm I went down the valley, leaving the town to my left about a mile. At first I thought I would go in and buy some little thing; candy or chewing gum, but being somewhat bashful, I did not know what the citizens might think if they saw an armed tenderfoot, walking along the main street, so I decided to steer clear of the town. As I swung on my way down the valley, I kept my eyes on the ground, looking for specimens of some sort or discription.

Suddenly something caught my eye. It seemed like a small stone, peculiarly shaped. I stopped and picked it up. Then I saw it was an Indian arrow-head. It was of red flint and showed the marks where it had been cut. It was almost perfect, except a little bit of the point was broken off. I was greatly pleased and I thought, here is something of interest to show the boys, as they often joshed me about these excursions of mine.

I now watched carefully every step, hoping to run across some more, and my search was rewarded for I found another of dark stone, not so pretty as the first, but broader and more perfect. In fact, it was quite perfect, and I found still another a few feet further on and this completed my collection for the day. This last arrow was of a black stone. I can't tell you how I valued these and it made me realize the nearness of the savage West more clearly

than I had before and what lay before us. I may say that I have since had the pink arrow-head mounted so that I could use it for a watch charm.

It was now getting towards evening and I was beginning to think of returning to the farm, when I noticed ahead of me a house, standing alone, down in the valley, with a guard of trees around it. What it was that impelled me to go down there I do not know, but go I did. There was some interest or fascination. There was not a sign of life about the place. And I soon saw that it was a deserted house.

It was two stories and had once been painted white, and now was badly weathered. The bricks had fallen from the two outside chimneys, built at either end onto the roof with its curled-up shingles and some were on the ground. One thing I thought strange, was that none of the windows were broken. The door was an ordinary wooden one and unpainted and across the division between the upper panels was drawn four black lines.

As I went up a path now overgrown, I saw some animal, dog or coyote, or whatever it was, slink from under the house and disappear. Somehow it made me shiver, it was so gaunt and ghostly. I felt like turning back then and there. But I went up the rickety steps, curious to see what was in the silent house. As I put my hand on the knob to

turn it I heard a sound in the house like a falling body and then not a groan or cry, just a whisper. I did not open the door and left abruptly. Dusk seemed to have fallen suddenly and, looking back, I saw the house standing gloomily alone. In the West, back of it, the sun had sunk in a black mass of ominous clouds, and all the windows of the house seemed to stare at me like dead eyes.

CHAPTER XVI

A STRANGE STORY

I WALKED briskly back over the plains and it was cheerful to see the lights shining from the windows of the cottage.

"Well, Jo," exclaimed Jim, as I came in, "we were beginning to think that you were lost, strayed or stolen; where have you been?"

"Just prospecting," I said.

"I bet you didn't find anything, I know your style of prospecting, mooning around," said Tom, "and wearing out shoe leather."

"You are a wise guy, Tom," I retorted, "but I did pick up these." and I held the three arrow heads in my hand under the light of the lamp.

They all crowded around me to get a look at the specimens.

"Good for you, Jo," said Mr. Hoskins, heartily slapping me on the back, "where did you get them?"

"About a mile from here, on the other side of the wood."

"That's the part of an old battlefield," said the

farmer, "but I thought most of them had been picked up by this time. Let's see that pink flint."

"It's a pity that the tip is broken," said Will, "it's certainly a beaut."

"I'm going to keep this one and send the other two home to father. He will be interested," I said.

"Won't it frighten your mother and make her think of the Indians?" said poor Mrs. Hoskins.

"No, ma'am," replied Jim, "we never write any of our adventures that would scare her and as we are well, she thinks it is all right."

"You are a robust-looking lot," said Mr. Hoskins, "and if you feel you can eat a little something we will go in to supper."

As we sat down Jim was moved to apologize to Mrs. Hoskins in regard to our appetites.

"I love to see you boys eat, it would hurt my feelings if you didn't. I know that cooking your own food is hard work for you boys."

"It does get kind of tiresome," said Tom, who was the chef of our party. "Jo and Jim certainly eat an awful lot when we are traveling."

"Your appetite ain't so delicate, either, Tom," I said.

"Did you see anything besides specimens?" inquired Jim; "a jack rabbit or an antelope when you were strolling around?"

"Yes, I saw a house," I said.

"Gee!" exclaimed Tom, who was more or less sarcastic at times, "it must have frightened you, did you run?"

"That's exactly what I did," I said, "do you happen to know anything about a deserted house, Mr. Hoskins?" I continued, "that's about three miles south of here in the valley. It has a few old trees around it."

"Why, that's the Haunted House," put in Will, He was evidently proud that his section had one.

"It certainly looks it," I said.

"Why, you didn't go in?" asked Mrs. Hoskins in mild alarm, "nobody around here dares to."

"No, ma'am, I didn't. I went up to the door and put my hand on the knob, then I heard something or somebody in the house fall, and there was a sound of whispering; if they had yelled it would not have been so bad."

"Shucks," said Tom, "that's Jo's imagination. He is always seeing things or hearing them. I guess it was the wind banging a shutter, then whistling through the key hole, that's all. I don't believe in ghosts or haunted houses."

"But there wasn't any wind," I protested, "nor shutters to the windows and the door didn't have a key hole. I guess it was fastened on the inside. What have you got to say to that?"

"I don't care, I wouldn't be afraid to sleep there to-night," declared Tom, stoutly.

"Is that so?" I said, nettled that my haunted house should be taken so lightly and as if I was afraid of nothing. "I tell you what we will do; we will walk over there to-night and take a look at it and I bet five dollars you will be scared before you get through."

Tom was somewhat surprised, but he did not flinch.

"Certainly I'll go," he said.

"I'm in on this, too," said Jim, "you can't lose me by talking about haunted houses."

"Hold on there, boys," said Mr. Hoskins, who had been listening quietly to our discussion, "that house has something of a history and I would not care about going alone there myself at night, though I am not superstitious."

We looked at him, fascinated and intensely interested.

"Tell us about the house, Mr. Hoskins," we asked in chorus.

"Well, there are different stories as there always is about such places. One thing is certain, there is something wrong about it. Respectable people have tried to live in it, but they couldn't stay, or rather wouldn't."

"The last family were there a week or two and

that satisfied them. They actually saw the ghosts of a man and woman. The man was fair, but had an evil face and the woman dark, beautiful, and they said almost human, as she appealed to them to save her with arms outstretched, but the man looked at her and she moaned and seemed to fade away. Then at night curious things used to happen. The clothes would be twitched off their bed and they could hear voices whispering and then something fall, just as Jo said."

"What did I tell you," I said, looking at Tom in triumph, "just one of my dreams, I suppose."

"It's impolite to interrupt," he said. Tom had the trick of controversy, and he was hard to corner.

"That's all right, Jo," said Mr. Hoskins. "Tom's simply joshing; now, as a matter of fact, there was a couple lived there alone a good many years ago. Where they came from no one knew. The man and woman were something like those people described. They were not looking for company, and they had money. They wanted to be let alone, and they certainly were. Not even the Indians would disturb them. I suppose there was some mystery back of it all. Anyway, they disappeared one night, absolutely, and nothing was ever seen of them. No more than if the earth had opened and swallowed them up. Some sort of an

animal stays around there, but nobody has ever got a good look at him."

"Yes, I saw him," I exclaimed, "and he slunk off before I got a look at him."

"Exactly," and Mr. Hoskins resumed his narrative. "After those people had disappeared, three renegade half-breeds camped in the house. One night, in a fight over a game of cards, one of them was killed and the people around here would not have cared if all three of them had been shot. It was believed that they were concerned in robberies and other crimes. Since then screams and yells, they say, have been heard there late at night. So you see, it naturally has a bad reputation."

"I should say so," said Jim, "what do you think about it now, Tom? Do you feel like making a call on the ghosts?"

"Of course," he replied, "I said I would, and I will."

"We will go along and see the fun, won't we, Jo?" said Jim.

"Sure," I replied. "I would not miss this trip."

"Say, Pa, can't I go?" inquired Will. "I will carry the lantern for the boys."

"Why, son," said Mrs. Hoskins, "you don't want to go to such a frightful place, and then it is going to storm, I'm afraid."

"Oh, pshaw, Ma! it will be all right if I'm with the boys, and I never get to go anywhere."

"That's so, Mother," said Mr. Hoskins, "let the boy go, no harm will come to him, even if he does get scared."

"Very well, William," she replied, "it will be all right if you say so, and it's true the boy does have a lonely time with just us old folks around."

"You don't think you will get lost, do you, boys? It's pitch dark and on the prairie at night it's pretty hard to tell where you are sometimes," said Mr. Hoskins.

"Will can help us when it comes to finding the trail," said Tom.

"I can do that," he said, "because I have hunted all over the country and I know it pretty well."

"I will put the two big lamps in the parlor window, so that you will have something to guide you," said Mr. Hoskins.

"That will be just the thing," said Tom.

It did not take us long to make our preparations after supper. It was warm and muggy, so that we did not have to put on our coats, for even if it did rain, the less we had on the better.

So we wore our old gray campaign hats, flannel shirts of the same color, and pants to match. We also took our rifles, at least Tom and Jim did.

"I am not going to bother with a gun," I said,

"all I want is my bowie knife." This I strapped around my waist in its leather sheath. Will got the lantern.

"We don't need to light it yet," I said, "because the first part of the way will be easy."

Then saying goodbye, we started out into the night. It certainly was dark, clouds, heavy and black, all over the sky and in the north there was continual flashes of sheet lightning, perfectly silent.

We followed along the grass road. Tom and I in one wheel track, Jim and Will in the other. We swung along in good style, the dog Ben at our heels. He would come along.

"It's awful dark. I hope we won't miss it," I said. "Ah, here's the main road." We took our bearings from it and plunged into the darkness again.

"Hello, what's that just ahead? Sic 'em Ben;" but he would not stir.

"Oh, you didn't see anything," said Tom, "I wish you would quit your false alarms, Jo."

He was irritable and I judged he was getting nervous.

"I did see something, it was kind of light colored and looked like a dog."

Just then came a prolonged howl to our left, long drawn out like a moan.

"Oh shut up, you darn old coyote," said Jim..

and he brought the gun to his shoulder and fired in the direction of the noise.

The fire leaped from the muzzle of the rifle and in the silence it seemed to roar. Not another whimper came from that coyote.

"That was a good shot," laughed Jim, "but we can't stop to get him now."

Then we took up the trail again.

"I guess we must have missed it," said Tom.

"We ought to be pretty close to it by this time," I replied. "Hello, what is that over there, it looks like a clump of trees."

"I thought I saw a light just them," said Jim. We stopped and looked intently ahead.

CHAPTER XVII

THE HOUSE AMONG THE TREES

IT was the "House Among the Trees." As far as the light was concerned we could not guess what made it at first.

"There must be somebody in that house," I declared.

"That's nonsense," said Tom, "I know now what the light was. It was the reflection of the lightning in the window panes."

This seemed plausible enough.

"We might as well light the lantern now," said Will, "and then we can see where we are going."

He struck a match and held it in the cup of his hand, and the wind blew it out. Then we gathered close around him, protecting the light with our coats. Finally we got the lantern lit. As I was the one who was supposed to be the best acquainted with the place, the honor of leading the procession was given to me. So I took the lantern and started up the path to the house. I had not gone three steps before the wind blew the lantern out.

"That's funny," said Will, "I have taken that lantern out in a blizzard and it never blew out."

"There is no use bothering with it," I said.

"We will light it when we get into the house," suggested Jim.

The wind was swaying the branches of the cottonwoods over our heads in the darkness. As I came near the house I stopped so quickly that Jim, who was following close behind me, bumped into me, much to his disgust, which he did not fail to express.

"What's that under the house?" I exclaimed. "There, you can see its eyes gleaming. I bet it's the same thing I saw slinking off this afternoon."

Whatever it was, the thing had got up and was coming slowly toward us, then it moved sideways, but kept its burning eyes on us.

"Go for him Ben, eat him up," commanded Tom.

But he would not move, but crept closer to our heels, his hair bristling, and growling low. Then the thing seemed to disappear, loping away in the night.

"I never saw a dog or coyote strike that gait in my life," said Will.

We now stepped upon the porch and the boards sounded hollow under our feet, you would have thought a whole regiment was there, instead of four boys. The windows were glaring at us and the

house seemed as hollow as a shell. Then I saw a light. I was sure of it this time and the rest of the boys saw it too.

"I am going in this house," declared Tom, in a loud voice. "I ain't afraid of any of you things in there, you can bet on that."

No sound or word or whisper came in reply. He took hold of the knob of the door and turned and twisted it.

"It must be locked," he said, and he threw his weight against it. Suddenly it opened and Tom fell in on the floor, the rest of us following. The wind through the house stirred everything loose.

"Shut the door," said Tom, "and then we will light the lantern." Jim slammed it shut and the house seemed filled with that strange silence.

"Listen!" I exclaimed, "it's that sound again."

In spite of ourselves we waited in awed silence. Then there was the sound as of a body falling in a room upstairs, followed by that strange whispering, "Sh-sh-sh," in a woman's voice, then a man's murmuring low intense, but we could not make out any single word, and the place of the whispering changed to the next room to where we were.

If they would only speak out, but that low continuous sound as over some terrible deed that required secrecy, made our blood curdle. We lighted the lantern and could see that the room where we

were was quite empty, except for a box by the further window. On it was a few inches of greasy candle and upon the floor was the skirt of a woman's dress, utterly worn and dirty, but it looked to me as if it had been of good material, quite different from the calico of Kansas. In the other room was a rusty sheetiron stove. As we entered an ugly gray rat ran across the floor and into some rubbish in one corner.

"If anybody sees this lantern moving around in here, they sure will think this house is haunted," said Jim.

"You don't hear any more of that whispering," remarked Tom, "when we have the lantern lit. There's nothing here but that hole in the floor."

"I bet that's where they threw things," I said.

"Who?" inquired Tom beligerently, because he did not like my method of conjuring things up.

"Why, those half breeds," I said, "maybe that's where they buried —"

"O shut up," said Tom, "don't get started thinking things. Let's go up-stairs, there isn't anything down here."

"Go ahead," said Jim.

We went into the other room and started up the narrow stairs, that had no railing on the outside. Jim was carrying the lantern. About half way up

it went out, with no apparent reason, for there was neither breeze nor draft, though outside swept and roared the wind, beating the trees, while in the house there was that peculiar silence.

"Let's go down," I said.

I was next in line behind Jim, and I started to turn around.

"You go on," ordered Tom, "no backing out now, and you will shove us off."

"Goodness! What is that?" I exclaimed, thoroughly frightened, as I clung to Jim, to keep from falling to the floor. I could feel him trembling. Something black and low had rushed between us and the wall going upstairs.

"It's that dog of ours," said Jim.

Just as he spoke Ben came tearing down the stairs.

"He's gone crazy, clear plumb crazy. I can see the foam on his mouth," said Tom.

There was something frightful in having our faithful old friend suddenly transformed into a wild animal.

"You come here," commanded Tom, "you fool dog, come here or I'll kill you."

Something in his voice brought Ben cowering to his heels. We went on cautiously through the darkness, going down the narrow hall, then into

the south room. A flash of lightning revealed its bareness, but in the centre there lay a dark object like a huddled human form.

"What is that?" queried Will, in a shaking voice.

Tom had the nerve to go up to it and stir the bundle with his foot.

"It's nothing but some old clothes," he promptly reported.

Then it stirred, as if alive, and two dark objects scurried across the floor, one of them struck me squarely on the heel, almost throwing me off my balance. It was two big rats, and Ben, instead of grabbing them, began to howl and of all dismal and unearthly sounds, I never heard the equal as they echoed through the vacant house. Tom was so exasperated that he gave him a kick.

"I'll give you something to howl for," he said.

"Let's finish this business up," said Jim.

We went down the narrow hall into the last room, the one on the north. It was empty except for a double bed in one corner, with a cheap wooden frame without mattress or slats.

"I guess that's about all," said Tom.

Then we heard what sounded like someone knocking on the door downstairs.

"Come in," said Tom, in a voice that was not like his at all, it sounded strangely different

"Sh-sh-sh," came a whisper from the dark and furthest corner of the room, then the low murmur of what seemed like a man's voice, and then the darkness seemed to separate and something was forming, coming to life there before our very eyes.

We were nothing but boys after all, and we rushed from the room, panic stricken. Missing the stairs, we banged into the wall, that whisper following us. "Sh-sh-sh."

At last in our gropings in the pitch dark we found the stairs and went down the steps helter-skelter. It was a wonder we did not break our necks. Then a body fell upstairs. It was enough, but we did not escape so easily. For as we made for the front door, crash, bang, came something — some terrible menace against the back door. It seemed to bend inwards and as we flung the other door open, crash, it came into the middle of the room,— the Gray Beast,— its eyes glaring and every hair erect.

I was the last and as I slammed the door just in time, I felt the Beast surge against it. Jumping off the porch and clearing the steps at one bound, I ran down the path between the trees, where the boys were waiting for me in the open. We turned and saw the Beast glaring at us from the porch.

Jim, before we could stop him, pulled up his rifle

and fired. We could see the white flash of the Beast's teeth, as he jumped off the porch into the path between the trees. There he stood glaring and bristling at us in a perfect fury. Jim was just going to fire again when Tom and I grabbed him.

"Come on, you idiot," said Tom. "We don't want any of his game," and we dragged the protesting Jim away.

He was firmly convinced that he could do anything with his rifle and would have taken a shot at the old Devil himself if he had come in range.

"He won't follow us off his own ground if we leave him alone," I said.

In this I was right. As we hurried back in the face of a rapidly rising storm, we had little to say until we struck the grass road and saw the welcome lights of the farm house in the window, then our speech loosened.

"No more haunted houses for me," remarked Tom. "Once is enough. How do you make it out Jo? I guess you have some idea. You generally have."

"I figure this way, you know that man and woman Mr. Hoskins told us about?"

"Yes," said the chorus.

"They weren't Americans," I continued, "but they came over to this country to get away from something they were afraid of, and they took the

loneliest place they could find. Still they were haunted by their crime."

"What crime?" asked Jim.

"Maybe they had killed somebody, and they whispered when they heard him come and knock on the door, then he came in and they hit him on the head. He fell. That's what made the noise and the thing kept haunting them until they could not stand it any longer."

"How about that animal, was he real?" asked Tom. "Because," he continued, "the people we heard whispering were not."

I hesitated a moment, because I felt kind of stuck up to have Tom asking me, since he generally had the floor himself. So I kept them in suspense.

"Yes," I said finally, "I think he was real. It sure seemed so when he struck the door when I was holding it. Looked to me to be a big hound, maybe a boar hound, that belonged to that man and woman."

"When they disappeared he stayed around there because he had no other place to go and he was faithful to the place where his owners had lived."

"That may all be so," Jim said, "but I bet the wind had a lot to do with the noises we heard in the house."

"Maybe it had something to do, but not all," I replied.

"Well," resumed Jim, "I would rather meet a wild man than one of those big rats, if cornered."

"You are right about that," said Tom, "they are terrible fighters."

"Anyhow," continued Jim, "if you fellows had given me another chance with my rifle I would have nailed that dog."

Here the discussion ended for we had arrived at the house and received a warm welcome. The folks were beginning to be worried because it was getting so late. While we ate gingerbread and doughnuts, which Mrs. Hoskins had brought out from the pantry, we went over our evening's adventures.

"Well, boys, I guess you won't find anything more exciting in the way of ghosts when you reach the Rockies," said Mr. Hoskins. "Good night."

We were inclined to agree with him then for we could not foresee what was to happen to us on a certain night in Wall Creek Canon, Colorado. But that is another story.

That night Tom and I distinguished ourselves by having the nightmare and I doubt if Will Hoskins got any sleep at all. But I wager you others fellows would have been just as bad, if you had gone through an experience like ours.

CHAPTER XVIII

A GAME OF HORSESHOES

THE next day was the third of July and in the forenoon we rested up and took things easily, so that we would be in some sort of shape for the events of the morrow.

In the afternoon we helped Mr. Hoskins and Will get in a bunch of hay from one of the lower meadows.

"You boys pitch hay like old timers," he said. "I wish you were here to help me get in my whole crop. We would make short work of it. But I suppose your mining interests in the West will require your attention?"

And there was a quizzical look in his eyes that made us feel that he did not take our prospecting very seriously. But we did not mind that because even our best friends in the East took the same view of our prospects. Likewise suggested various names for the new companies we were to form as: "The Three Kids Gold Mill and Mining Co.," "The Tom, Jim and Jo Silver Coin Co."

"We would like to stay, Mr. Hoskins," said Tom,

"but if we strike a good thing out West we will let you in too."

"This certainly is fun," said Jim, as we trailed after the first load of hay, our pitchforks held industriously over our shoulders.

"It makes us forget all about that haunted house business last night," I said, and indeed we had little time to think about anything, as Mr. Hoskins and Jim forked us the hay from the wagon with the desirable object of burying us from view and it kept Tom, Will and I hustling to mow the hay away.

"My, how it makes you sweat!" exclaimed Tom, as he wiped the hay dust from his face and neck with a red bandanna handkerchief, he had purchased in a small Missouri town.

"It will certainly take all the impurities out of your system; Tom," I said.

"If it would sweat out some of your finnickiness it would be a good thing," he retorted.

"My, that water tastes good," said Jim, as he put the contents of the tin dipper down his throat, "Kansas has good water."

It did not take us long to get the three loads of hay into the barn, as there was considerable rivalry between Tom and I on one side and Jim and Will on the other, to see who would be the first to get their hay shocks into the wagon.

I guess that Will and Jim would have got the de-

cision, as Will had the experience and Jim the muscle, but we made them hustle because Tom and I were quick and wiry. As we got through an hour before chore time, due to our united industry, we put in the balance of the afternoon pitching horseshoes; here Tom and I were champions.

"Which one of you boys is the best at this game?" asked Mr. Hoskins, as he stopped on his way to the house, to watch our game.

"Jo is," was the verdict.

"He can beat you, Pa," said Will.

"I don't know about that," said Mr. Hoskins, "I'll try my hand at it."

No sooner had he cast the first two shoes than I saw that he was a master hand at the game. His first throw cut the dirt against the stake, and his second throw was a leaner, that is it leaned against the pin, counting three, while a ringer was five.

I managed with my first to knock the leaner away, but though my second shoe interlocked his first, he beat me the fraction of an inch.

"I am going to change shoes," I said.

"All right, Jo," he laughed, "help yourself, there is a bunch of them there by the barn."

I sorted them over and picked out a pair of small heavy mule shoes, with sharp thick thumbs that would hold fast to the ground and not slide. My game improved and I held him even. Our styles

of throwing differed. Mr. Hoskins gave the shoe a straight pitch, while I used a twirling motion from the wrist.

"Here's where I beat you, Jo," he said.

As I held the stake for the last round, I poised myself carefully, determined to win out for the honor of the East, which I represented, as against the West. My first shoe was a ringer.

"Fine work, Jo," exclaimed Mr. Hoskins, enthusiastically, "but you want to look out that shoe points this way. I am liable to knock it back."

"Don't you let Pa scare you, Jo," said Will, "you beat him and you are the champion of the county."

I thought as much when I saw him make his first throw. My last shoe I aimed carefully to fall before the stake, to protect my ringer. I made a pretty good shot of it.

But Mr. Hoskins went me one better when his turn came, for his first shoe struck fairly, knocking my ringer back and his last was right on top of my second shoe. It was so close that it had to be measured, and Tom, with the aid of a yellow straw, decided that Mr. Hoskins' shoe was the fraction of a hair nearer than mine.

Will, who wanted to see his father beaten, also measured with another yellow straw and declared that I had won by the fraction of an inch.

"We'll call it even, Jo," said Mr. Hoskins heartily.

"No, no, that's all right," I said, "you won, but I made you hustle."

"You certainly did, my boy, and there is nobody in Marion county, Kansas, that could have done it better."

"Supper's all ready, Father," called Mrs. Hoskins, from the kitchen door. "You and the boys had better come in."

At supper we talked over the events of the next day, the glorious and welcome fourth.

"You boys had better turn in early and get a good night's rest," said Mr. Hoskins, "to-morrow will be a busy day for you."

We took the advice and were stowed away in the mow by eight o'clock and fell asleep to the tune of the horses chewing the corn from the cobs in the feed box. And the first thing we knew there was an explosion over our heads on the roof and the horses jumped back.

"Hello!" I said, sitting up, "what's the matter now?"

"It's the glorious fourth. Hurrah," yelled Jim, jumping on my neck, and we rolled down the hay together.

Will came in laughing.

"How's that for a firecracker?"

"First rate," I said, "let's have some more." And hurrying outside we got busy celebrating.

"This is a going to be a fine day for the games, boys," said Mr. Hoskins, coming out of the house.

"It's going to be hot but that suits us to a T," suggested Jim.

"Have all the fun you can boys, but keep the fire crackers away from the barn," continued Mr. Hoskins.

After breakfast the team of strong, well matched bays was hitched to the new farm wagon, and an extra spring seat was put in back and we drove off in high spirits for the neighboring town.

As soon as we got on the main road we began to see a number of teams all going one way and the wagons filled with old folks and young. We passed a few and the occupants seemed more than ordinarily interested in us, so we guessed that there had been some talk around the country in regard to the tenderfeet from the East, who were going to perform in the events of the day.

In about an hour we arrived in the town and found the main street lined with wagons, buggies and other vehicles. Everybody seemed to know Mr. Hoskins and greeted him accordingly, and they also took a good look at the three strangers from the East and we were the objects of varied comments. Some of them we felt were not especially

friendly, the boys laughed, and we heard some of their remarks.

"I guess we will show those tenderfeet something," said one.

"Indian Jo will beat that white-headed kid," meaning me, "all holler."

"One of them fellows is a pitcher and he thinks he is going to show the team from Hughesville something. Why they will eat him alive. He ought to have a bottle."

Jim began to get rather hot under the collar.

"We will show those Rubes something before we are done with them. Because we ain't clodhoppers," he said. "They think we are just kids, but we'll fool them some."

"How are you feeling, Jo?" asked Tom.

"Oh, I'm all right," I said, and yet I was beginning to feel rather nervous, like a cat in a strange garret. Nor was I much encouraged when Mr. Hoskins introduced me to the captain of the "River Bend Reds." He was a big, strapping young fellow, who played first base, and he made no bones of his disappointment in my size. His rough lack of cordiality further depressed my spirits. He and Mr. Hoskins had an earnest conversation apart, and I heard him say:

"Very well, Mr. Hoskins, you have helped us get the uniforms for the fellows and we want to

please you. If Jere Smith, the pitcher, plays out, we will put this boy in and give him a chance, but between me and you Mr. Haskins, he don't look very much."

So it was settled.

"We'll show 'em won't we, Jo," he said, clapping me on the shoulder and I determined to justify his confidence in me if it were possible.

CHAPTER XIX

THE FOURTH OF JULY

ABOUT noon there was a big hurrah and excitement on the main street of River Bend, as two big wagons, drawn by four horses apiece and decorated with bunting, came into town with the famous Hughesville base ball team aboard. They carried several triumphant banners.

"The champions."

"15 to 2."

"We will do it again."

They were certainly a proud lot of bumpkins, and you would have thought they owned the town as they climbed out of the wagons and swaggered into "The Grand Central Hotel." Chiefly distinguished by a row of wooden arm chairs in which tilted back against the building, sat some of the principal citizens in their shirt sleeves.

"Come on, boys," said Tom, "let's have a look at the animals."

So we sauntered into the main office of the "Grand Central Hotel," with its plain wooden floor

adorned with big brown crockery spittoons and the office part, a wooden counter enclosing one corner behind which stood the clerk, a young fellow in shirt sleeves, and a pen behind his ear. He appeared to be strictly business and was full of hustling importance.

"Which is the pitcher, Will?" I asked, being anxious to size up my opponent of the afternoon.

"It's that fellow with the red necktie and long black coat."

I took a good look at him. There was no doubt that he felt his importance as he swaggered around, the center of interest and admiration, spitting tobacco with a great deal of accuracy.

"He is certainly a big, raw-boned fellow," said Tom, "and if he knows the game he will be dangerous."

"He sends the ball over like a shot," said Will, "but he hasn't as many tricks as Jo."

"I bet if you lined a few at him right hard, he would go up in the air," said Jim.

"Yes," put in Tom, "to get out of the way."

By this time the visitors were looking us over for they had learned somehow that I was one of the pitchers for the "River Bend Reds."

After they had sized me up they began to guffaw and were not at all particular to hide their contempt for my size.

"What a runt," said the big, raw-boned pitcher, as he spit expressively into a cuspidor.

"If he would stay in Kansas for a while, and get corn fed he would be all right," laughed the captain, a heavy set, square shouldered ranchman, but good natured.

"If that's what the River Bends have come to, I'm sorry for them," said another.

Jim began to warm up himself and he had a cool, stinging way with him when he got started, and it looked as if there might be a fight, when two men came out of the barroom and they changed the current of interest.

"Hello," exclaimed Tom, "if that isn't those fellows we yanked out of the river." They also recognized us at the same time.

"Hey, Bill," said one to his partner, "if there ain't those three kids that got us out of the quicksands." And they came up to us and shook hands.

"Come on, boys, and have a drink," said the one who had the bottle in the wagon. We shook our heads emphatically.

"That's right boys," said the bigger fellow of the two, "you ought to have a better sense, Bill, than to ask those kids to drink."

Then he asked us about our team and how we captured them.

The crowd was looking on at this reunion with

great interest and began to get funny after their rough farmer fashion. As soon as the two men found out their situation they began to talk themselves.

"I bet you ten dollars that the boy (meaning me), will beat you this afternoon," said Jake, the man who recognized us first, addressing the big pitcher, who had been talking the loudest, waving a roll of bills under his nose. This did not suit the big fellow and he withdrew into the background, growling to himself.

"We'll accommodate any of you gents," put in Bill, "if you want to bet." But no one came forward.

"I reckon we had better be going," I said to Tom, and we left after the two men had again insisted on shaking hands with us.

"Here's wishin' you good luck, kid," Jake said, "and I'd bet my last dollar on you. We'll be on hand to help you win."

"That's so," chimed in Bill, "you look like a winner to me."

They might not be very creditable citizens, but I could not help feeling grateful to them, for I felt somewhat lonesome, with the River Benders and the other side both running me down and my disreputable looking champions warmed my heart after all. It's a good thing to have a booster sometimes.

"I wonder where those fellows get their money," I said.

"I reckon they are gamblers," said Tom, "they act like it."

"Well, they look good to me," I said.

"Don't it make you feel shaky, Jo," asked Will, "when you see those big, husky fellows?"

"No," I said, "if I felt my own side would back me up."

"It's this way, Will," said Jim, "the size don't count in base ball, and I have seen Jo pitch against some professional teams up the state when they played the Hill School and came pretty near beating them, too."

Will expressed his surprise.

"You see," I explained, "one of the fellows who pitched for a big team, lived in our town, and he took an interest in me and taught me a whole lot."

"Who is that fellow leaning against the front of the postoffice?" asked Tom, "he looks like an Indian."

"He is part Indian," said Will, "and he is the fastest runner in this county. He is in the races this afternoon and I don't believe Jo can beat him, for he certainly can run."

I had my doubts too, as I looked at him. There was an admiring crowd around him. But he stood

there perfectly stolid, only once did his black eyes shift in our direction and then he looked over the heads of the crowd in perfect indifference.

"My, but he has got the build for a runner," said Jim, admiringly. There was no mistake about it. Long and and lithe and he moved as gracefully and unconsciously as a sleek, wild animal.

"When do the races come, Will?" I asked.

"After the game," he replied.

"That suits me," I said, "if I had to run first, I would be tired, but pitching won't hurt my legs much, but I guess that fellow will beat me, he looks it."

"You will have to hurry, that's certain," said Jim.

And there was no doubt that he was correct.

The first thing on the program was an oration, delivered from a wooden platform, built for the occasion and with a covering of red calico. The orator was the "smart" young lawyer of River Bend, who was in line for some political office. He scorched the British and lauded Washington and the Pilgrim Fathers, sawing the air with his right arm and his long coat waving in the breeze. He wound up his oration with a glowing tribute to the River Bend base ball team.

"Who will on this memorable 4th of July, consecrated forevermore to Freedom, free us from the

insolence and tyranny of the hirelings of Hughesville."

Then came prolonged cheering by the citizens of River Bend, and wild yells by the two ex-prospectors, who drew unfavorable attention to themselves by their enthusiasm.

After this was over we sat in our wagon and ate our dinner, which Mrs. Hoskins had packed in a wicker basket, covered with a white table cloth, neatly folded.

I guess we boys will always remember that particular dinner, eaten on the edge of River Bend, with the free wind blowing over the prairies, the sunshine and the wonderful blue skies. Then there was the prospect of taking up our adventurous travels on the morrow and an afternoon of sport, ahead, so we attacked that dinner with a fine appetite.

There was sliced roast chicken, sausages and ham, home made pickles, sweet potatoes, coffee made over an old fashioned campfire, then apple pie and pudding.

With that dinner inside of me, I felt almost equal to shutting out the Hughesville team. After dinner came the target shooting at the range of three hundred yards. There were ten contestants, counting Jim. Some of those Kansas men were fine shots and others were regular farmers at the game.

The first man up made a good shot. Just within the circle of the bull's-eye. The second was a young fellow with heavy cowhide boots and pants tucked into their tops and a biled shirt with a collar that gave him considerable discomfort. He was nervous, as he was somewhat of a beau and all the girls were looking at him. The gun swayed considerably as he aimed, and missed the target entirely. How the crowd yelled as he stepped back in confusion, which his high collar could not altogether conceal.

"Here's another," cried the crowd, as Jim stepped forward and leveled his rifle at the target.

"Look out, he might hit somebody," yelled a fellow on horseback, and threw himself to one side of his horse as though afraid. Jim took his rifle down and took a look at the fellow, then grim and cool, he brought his rifle up again and fired almost instantly, hitting the edge of the bull's-eye.

"Say, you fellow," yelled Tom, in derision, "How do you like that?"

As the contest continued it narrowed down to three and Jim was one of the three. The other two shot like frontiersmen, as I have no doubt they were. Jim had to be satisfied with third place and prize, which chanced to be a shaving mug and there was lots of fun over that in which we all joined.

"You are all right, Johnny," said our friends

from Sand River. "Those old chaps know the game, but you made them hustle."

The next was the base ball game, and that was up to me.

The ball field was on the outskirts of the town and there was a narrow path worn between the bases. All round the field were people in wagons, on horse back or standing.

The River Bend team was already on the ground, and in a short time the Hughesville aggregation came through the crowd and onto the scene of conflict. They were big husky fellows in their brown uniforms, and the River Bends in their red suits, looked a good deal smaller.

After a little miscellaneous practice the game began, while I sat quietly on the bench in my own uniform of gray, with H. H. in red letters on the chest. It seemed mighty good to have the old suit on again, that I had worn in many a hard fought contest and it gave me confidence to have it on. The folks at home had guyed me because I would bring it along, but I was obstinate about it.

I sat on the bench leaning forward, with my arms on my knees, watching the beginning of the game with keen interest.

The Browns were at the bat, and the big, square-shouldered captain led off. He was too eager and missed the first ball by a foot, but the next time

he swiped the ball and it went between the center-fielder's legs and the captain brought up on third base, blown but triumphant, with his cap gripped in his hand, and how the people from Hughesville and his team-mates did yell, and before that inning was over the enemy had made four runs.

I saw clear enough that the home pitcher could not last, he was nervous and wild. In their half the locals only made one run.

The Hughesville pitcher had plenty of speed and fine control.

I thought the captain would put me in for the next inning, but he did not, and the first man up, who was the captain, landed on the ball and it sailed over the leftfielder's head and into a wagon, where an old lady was sitting in a rocking chair, and you would have laughed to have seen her standing up and waving her umbrella at the man who hit the ball. She thought he had done it on purpose and by the time she was quieted he had made home and the opposition went wild and the Great Benders looked kind of sick.

There was a consultation between the local captain and some of the players.

"Put the kid in. Give him a chance," yelled our two friends, the ex-prospectors. The crowd said nothing, because they thought they were beaten

whichever way it turned. Finally the captain came over to me. "All right, Bub," he said, "come on. It is your turn now." But right here a new trouble arose.

The catcher refused to backstop for me and was balky as a mule.

"I ain't going to be made a fool of," he said. "I ain't a school kid."

At this juncture I put in my oar. "All right," I said, "my brother will do the catching. This fellow could not hold me if I cut loose. Come on Jim."

He was out in the field in a jiffy and then we lined up, with Jim behind the bat and I in the pitcher's box. How the Hughesville boys did guy us.

"Look at the kids."

"Does your mamma know you're out?"

"Where is the baby's bottle?"

"Who's got some soothing syrup?"

But our two friends made themselves heard on the other hand.

"Hey, you big farmers, shet up or put up."

"Back to the manure pile."

I suppose that what the Hughesville fellows had said made me so mad, that I lost my judgment for a moment and slammed the ball straight over and the batter, a tall lanky fellow, knocked it through

short and got to second base. Now the visitors did yell for sure. It seemed all over but the shouting.

The next man up was eager to distinguish himself and waved his hat frantically over the plate to terrify me. This time I kept my head. Slowly I rubbed my hand in the dirt. Then just as deliberately as I could, I began to make preparations to pitch.

The fellow thought I was frightened, and he half turned his head to say something about "the kid" to the players on the bench, when I put the ball over like a shot.

"One strike," sang out the umpire.

How the crowd did yell from our side. It was their first chance, and they made the most of it. And the two prospectors jumped off the ground, striking their feet together and throwing their sombreros into the air. The demonstration made the batter wild. And he was ready to strike at anything to make up for lost time.

So I fed him a wide out-curve and he missed it about two feet. Almost falling over in his eagerness.

"Two strikes," counted the umpire.

How the crowd laughed and jeered.

The next time he was over cautious and stood like a stick when I put a straight one over.

"Three strikes and out," yelled the umpire.

"Three cheers for the 'kid' pitcher," cried Jake, from the fringe of the crowd. Then there was a great racket. Jim turned and grinned at the opposition bench. And he could put more insolence into a grin than any fellow I ever saw. But they were not done for yet.

"Show him up. Knock him out of the box," they yelled to the next batter up.

But the best he could do was a high foul, which Jim captured in fine style and the next man struck out. Still the visitors were four runs in the lead. I was not much of a hitter. So I let Jim bat first. I suppose the Hughesville pitcher thought Jim was easy. But he ought to have known better.

For when he tried to be funny, Jim slammed it out for three bases. Then I followed. The pitcher was mad and sent one over like a shot. I swung and missed.

"One strike," called the umpire.

Then Hughesville was heard from. The next time I sent an easy grounder to short, and ought to have been thrown out, but I beat the throw a foot, while Jim scored.

When the captain, the heavy hitter of the visiting team, came up in the fourth inning, I made an especial effort to strike him out, because I knew that would do more to discourage his team than

anything else. He was a natural ball player and a dangerous hitter.

Jim motioned for a drop and I sent it over and he almost gauged it. Jim ordered the same thing again, but I shook my head and threw an out, but he would not bite. My best was a high in-shoot and I determined to try it on him. There was no sound from the crowd, for they were watching intently to see what the outcome of the duel between the "kid pitcher" and the batter would be. I poised myself and threw. He drew his head back in alarm.

"Two strikes," said the umpire.

There was a big kick at this, but it earned them nothing.

"The ball cut the corner of the plate," said the umpire, and that settled it. The next one was also a high-in, which he swung at and missed. Our side kept crawling up, till at the beginning of the ninth the score stood six-five in our favor.

They had made a run on a two-base hit and an error. But by the ninth I had begun to tire and with only one out the bases were full. But with a big effort I pulled myself up another notch, determined to make a complete victory of it. And Jim and I pulling together for all we were worth, struck the last two out. And the memorable game

for the year between River Bend and Hughesville was over.

If we had few friends when we struck River Bend that morning, it was a different proposition after the game. For the people appreciated our help in winning the game for their town, and were mighty cordial to us. We were not only introduced to the mayor, but we also had the honor of meeting the orator of the day, who gave us the warm political handshake and condescended to relate how he used to play One-o-cat when he was a boy, a game where, if the runner was hit with the ball as he was running between the bases he was out.

The two prospectors were wild with enthusiasm and almost compelled us to come with them to have a drink in celebration of the occasion. "We will take soda water with you," said Tom.

"Soda water," gasped Bill, "that pizen you get out of those fountains. But we are game."

So we all went down the main street together, followed by an admiring crowd of small boys and looked at with admiration by the country girls in their best white dresses, tied around the waist with pink or blue sashes.

There is no use denying that we thought well of ourselves and enjoyed the applause, which was only natural. The soda water fountain was in the drug

store and we lined up along side of the counter and ordered several drinks.

"Just plain soda for me," I said, "if I have got to run."

"Give us strawberry," said Bill. "It's a warm color anyhow. Here's wishing you luck my boy," he continued, "and may you beat the Injun," and Jake followed suit.

It was funny to see the faces of the ex-prospectors as they swallowed the soda water.

"My constitution wouldn't stand much of that," was the concluding comment.

CHAPTER XX

THE RACE

IT was now getting towards evening, and the long shadows of the houses and trees were extending eastward. The wind had gone down and it was just a beautiful summer afternoon, tending towards the Peace of Evening.

"This is fine for the race, Jo," said Jim. "No wind to bother you."

"I guess you feel pretty tired," said Mrs. Hoskins, "poor boy, it's too hard work. I wouldn't run, you will hurt yourself. It was a shame the way those men talked to you. I could hardly stand it to hear them."

"Oh, that's all right, Mrs. Hoskins," I said. "We ball players are used to being yelled at."

"And Jo shut them up after he got started pitching," said Will, who was proud of my achievements, but I think his father was the best pleased of all, though he did not have so much to say as the others.

"All ready for the first race," said the marshal of the day, coming down the main street on his

fiery charger, that on ordinary occasions was a plain plow horse, as was shown by the worn places on his side, made by the traces. But he was quite martial with a blue sash across his shoulders, pinned by a rosette.

The course or track was laid down the middle of the main street. First came the hundred-yard race. There were six of us entered. Long and short, fat and thin. But the Indian was the one I was afraid of, for the others looked easy.

Why the fat, bald-headed man who was at the end of the line had entered, I do not know, unless it was for a joke.

"Are you ready?"

"Set yourself."

Then the pistol snapped. It was a false start and we got in our place again. This time it was a go. I sprang away in the lead and I could hear the crowd thundering behind me. When I had gone half the distance the Indian pulled up even with me. It was nip and tuck until the last twenty-five feet, when he put on a wonderful burst of speed and left me as though I had been anchored, winning by about five feet.

This gave the crowd from Hughesville a chance to yell. And they improved it all right. The Indian had come from their section and had won many a race for them. He was considered unbeatable,

and I could well see why, for he had remarkable speed.

After the 100-yard dash came a potato race. Then a three-legged race, in which Jim and Will were entered. They managed to hip-hop in second. These two races furnished lots of fun for all concerned, and for the people on the sidewalks and in the wagons, who lined the course and who had lots of sport joshing the different racers.

Now came the last race, the quarter of a mile. This had always been my favorite distance and I knew more about it than any other race. But I must admit that the Indian, had me more than worried. He had the speed and Indians have always been famous for endurance, but there is one thing about a quarter of a mile dash, that it is a punishing race, because you do not have the distance to get your second wind, as in the half and mile. It has to be run at almost top speed.

There was just one chance to beat the Indian, and that was to out-punish him. We would see who would stand the most.

"I want you to go in the race," I said to Tom, "and help me out. You haven't done anything for your country to-day."

"All right," said Tom, "what is it?"

"You are pretty fast for a short distance, and I want you to lead that Indian out as fast as you can

for the first two hundred yards, then you can drop."

"I'll be quite ready to," laughed Tom.

There was lots of excitement along the street as we stalked slowly down towards the starting line, and everybody was on the qui-vive, standing up in the wagons and on the seats to get a better view of the course.

In a way this was for the rubber and if the Indian won both races, the Hughesville crowd would have something to crow over, even if they had lost the base ball game.

The sun had just gone down and from the end of the street where the start was made, we could see the wide prairies in the pleasant shadow. It seemed cooler and more restful after all the excitement of the hot afternoon. But still I felt the strain of that race upon me in a peculiar way. I felt I must beat that Indian and yet I could not feel sure of success.

There was something sinister in the feeling between us; it was as though, if I were beaten it would be a disgrace to the white people of the community and to my own blood.

Besides Tom, myself and the Indian, there were two others; one was a tall, lanky fellow, with very light hair, who played centerfield for the Hughesville team; the other was a short, stocky fellow, who was second baseman for our team.

I looked at the Indian narrowly, and he seemed

perfectly stolid and indifferent, but there was a feeling of hostility that I was conscious of.

Up the street I could see the marshal trying to keep the course clear, as the people craned eagerly forward to see the start.

Then we got ready. Tom was next to the Indian, and I was third.

"He will have to run as he never did before," whispered Tom. "I am just in trim to push him hard."

Now came that hard, heart-throbbing, intense moment before the signal. Then at the crack of the pistol, we sprang forward.

The Indian led from the start and Tom was at his heels, keeping him at top speed.

It was all I could do to keep from being distanced but I did manage to keep within fifteen yards of the flying Indian, which is striking distance in the quarter-of-a-mile.

At the end of the first two hundred yards Tom dropped by the roadside, as though he were shot. Almost exhausted, as he was, he managed to roll over and yell:

"Go it, Jo, he's tired." As I swept past, that yell helped me a lot.

When Tom fell, the Indian looked back, with a peculiar laugh that had something of the grin of the coyote in it. It made my blood boil and I be-

gan to overhaul him, the dust flying back under my feet and every ounce of energy being put into my speed. At the three hundred mark I was only two yards behind, in the next fifty I pulled up even and now the crowds on either side of the street were yelling like mad as we came between them.

Above the noise I could hear the yells of the two prospectors. "Beat the Indian, Kid, scalp him."

The pace was too much for human endurance; it was the finish now, and I could see the tape twenty yards away. The Indian was tiring fast; I could tell that without looking, and I felt he was both surprised and discouraged. Now if it killed me I was going to beat him, and putting my panting strength into a last burst of speed, I beat him out by five feet. Then almost blinded, I stumbled forward, but Jim caught me.

I was ashamed to make such an exhibition at the finish, but it had been a grueling race, and the Indian had more stamina and kept his feet though he was pretty well done for.

As to the crowd, if there had been enthusiasm after the baseball game, this was a celebration. Our friends, the two prospectors, could not satisfy themselves with soda water this time, so they betook themselves to the Grand Central Hotel after leading several cheers for the "Kid."

It was now getting dusk and we decided not to

wait for the fireworks as we wanted to get a good start the next morning for the wilder west, as we thought our vacation had lasted as long as we could afford. That was our side of it and Mr. Hoskins had to get back in time for the chores and to milk the cows.

So, tired but happy, we rolled out of River Bend after a day we would remember with interest and pleasure as long as we lived.

"That was a grand-stand finish you made, Jo," said Tom, who was evidently afraid that I would get the swelled head.

"All right, Tommie," I said, patronizingly, "how about your finish; that was kind of sudden. You were going like a jack rabbit after the Indian when you quit."

"If it hadn't been for me you never would have beaten him," retorted Tom, and there was considerable truth in that. "However," he continued, "I could not have run another step at that gait, so I just naturally called myself off."

"I am glad enough you beat that Indian," said Mr. Hoskins, "it did me good through and through. You did well."

"I bet we won't hear so much from those fellows at Hughesville," remarked Will. "If they every peep again, I'll ask them what they think of 'Kid' pitchers."

The horses took us along at a good gait and we soon reached home, for though we had only been there a few days, it did seem like home to us.

We helped with the chores as usual, and after supper we sought our downy couches in the hay mow, and were soon sound asleep.

CHAPTER XXI

WE START AGAIN

"WAKE up, Jo," Jim yelled in my ear, "the Indian is going to beat you."

I jumped like I was shot and began paddling down the hay like a good fellow and how the boys did laugh. I dare say, it was funny to see me trying to beat an imaginary Indian.

"What's your hurry, it isn't daylight," I said, sleepily.

"We want to get an early start, because we are behind our schedule," replied Tom; "what do you want to sleep so much for? You will get hidebound."

"Humph," I retorted, proceeding to get into my clothes, "it's you who will get hidebound, sitting around, chewing your cud, while Jim and I are out in the hot sun, playing baseball and running races for the amusement of the natives and to give you something to brag about. You needn't talk."

But he did just the same and we carried on the discussion, while I curried Bill and Tom sleeked up Black Carl.

"My, but the horses are fat," I said, after awhile. "The rest has done them good, but Carl's two hind shoes are loose and we had better stop in River Bend and have them fixed."

"Yes," said Tom, "and we have got to get more grub, too."

We gave the horses a good rubbing down and there is considerable fun in currying horses. It's "snug" work, as the English say, and I am sorry for anybody who has never had a horse to take care of himself. I spent sometime over Bill's mane and forelock, brushing them until they were glossy and wavy and thus got ahead of Tom, who did not put on any extra touches.

It was now time for breakfast and we went in the house just as the sun was coming up over the level plain. Everything was all ready for the start except hitching up. Tom and I had the harness on the horses and Jim had the wagon greased. At breakfast the Hoskins expressed their regret at having us leave.

"I wish you boys did not have to go so soon," said Mrs. Hoskins, "we will all miss you and Will certainly will be lonesome."

"That's what I will, Ma," he said, almost tearfully, "I wish I was going too." ¶

"No, no, son, don't think of it for a moment," she exclaimed.

"Remember this," said Mr. Hoskins, "that you promised to take me into your gold mine."

"We won't forget, you may be sure," replied Tom.

"I have some pies and cakes for you boys," said Mrs. Hoskins, "they will make you remember the old folks on the Kansas farm."

"We don't need any reminder, Mrs. Hoskins," said Jim with fervor, "because we will never forget your kindness to us and the good time we have had here. Isn't that so, boys?"

"You bet it is," we said in chorus.

As we were busy getting the horses out of the barn, Mr. Hoskins came and spoke to us confidentially.

"You remember what I told you about our children being carried off by the Indians."

"We will never forget that," said Tom, with sympathy.

"Well, I cannot get over the idea that my boy and girl are still alive and with the Indians somewhere in the mountains of Colorado. If you ever get a hint or rumor or sign of them let me know and I will come out there as fast as I can."

"We most certainly will do what we can to help get them back," we said with all earnestness, "and you will be sure to hear from us. You can depend on us."

"I am sure of that, boys," he said, gratefully.

We were soon ready and after hearty good-byes we started on our journey, "Westward, Ho!"

Mr. and Mrs. Hoskins stood by the gate watching us and we turned and waved good-bye with our hats. It was almost as hard as when we left our own home in the East.

Will was in the wagon with us; no, we had not kidnaped him, but he was going to River Bend, intending to walk back. After we left the grass road and turned west, we felt all the eagerness and excitement of our first expectations come over us. There was something mysterious in the far-reaching plains, the bright sunshine over everything, and the absolute freedom of the life. Fortune, perhaps, and adventure surely ahead of us. No wonder we were happy.

"All out for River Bend," cried Jim, as we turned into the main street with the struggling cottonwoods on either side of the street and the few cottages, painted white or yellow, and further along the lines of gnawed hitching posts in front of the frame stores. All was quiet and peaceful after the excitement of the glorious Fourth. Back of the blacksmith's shop the usual game of horseshoes was going on and the same old citizens were tilted back in their chairs in front of the Grand Central Hotel.

We stopped in front of the "Emporium" and

Tom went in and bought what was necessary. He was always the purchasing agent for our party, and it would have taken a Yankee born in Jerusalem to get ahead of him. From the sounds of loud conversation inside the store we guessed that Tom was trying to get a rebate from the clerk in charge. As we sat outside in the wagon waiting, various citizens sauntered up and engaged us in conversation about the events of the day before.

"Good morning, sonny," said one white-bearded old fellow, leaning on his cane. "How's your laigs feelin' this mornin'; pretty lame, eh? Glad you beat the Indian. I used to run that away when I was your age."

"I bet you ran faster than that when the Injuns chased you off Williams creek," said a young clerk standing near by.

The old man began to sputter in his indignation and we took advantage of the interruption to go into the drug store and get some soda water, the last we were to taste for some time. The man refused to take anything for the drinks.

"Your money is no good here, boys," said the clerk. "This town owes you something for beating those Hughesville fellows." We thanked him.

"Have you seen anything of those two prospectors who were yelling around here?" said Jim.

"Oh, those fellars; they are up at the Grand Central dead drunk; they was celebrating all last night because you boys beat."

We were sorry that their enthusiasm had to take that turn, but we were just as well satisfied not to see them, because, though they were good boosters, they were hardly good companions and we thought that we would probably run across them again on our travels. By the time Jim and I came out of the drug store, Tom had bought out the town at reduced rates.

"Did you jew 'em down, Tom?" I asked.

"Of course I did," he replied, "did you think I had come out this far to get cheated? Not much. I'm not like you, paying the first price they ask. Not on your life."

We received quite an ovation as we left the town. People on either side of the street wished us good luck.

"Strike it rich, boys."

"We'll bet on you."

"Pike's Peak or Bust," were the farewell yells that greeted us.

"Why didn't you get up, Jim, on the seat," I asked, "and give a farewell address to the populace; 'What's banished but set free,' and all that rot?"

"I know that piece," said Will, "we speak it at our school."

"You ought to have taken off your sombrero yourself and bowed to the plaudits of the multitude," retorted Jim. "You don't know how to take that sort of thing; you just hang back like a whipped pup. Why don't you get some style on you?"

"I'll let you furnish that," I said, "that's all you are good for."

At the edge of the village we said good-bye to Will Hoskins with much regret, for he was a nice fellow and wasn't a fool, even if he had lived in the country all his life. We were sorry to see him legging it alone across the prairie towards his home. But he had wanted to be with us as long as possible; that is why he had ridden with us to River Bend.

"Make 'em go, now," I said to Jim, who was doing the driving. "They have had a long rest."

"Get ap, Bill," urged the driver; "Get ap, Carl."

Giving each horse a light touch with the black-snake, away we went at a merry clip along the level road that stretched away for miles in the distance, until it went over a rise of ground and disappeared.

"It's great! it's great!" yelled Tom; "hurrah for the Wild West and all its Injuns!"

To which toast we responded heartily.

"We ought to see the Colorado Mountains now inside of two weeks," said Jim.

With good luck we would and it sent a thrill

through me just to hear the name. We had always dreamed of those mountains with all their hidden adventures.

"You can see them for two hundred miles if it is clear weather," said Tom. "It's true, you just wait and see," he continued in reply to Jim's objections.

I was looking out of the back of the wagon to see if I could catch a glimpse of Will in the distance.

"Hello!" I exclaimed, "what's this coming behind us?"

CHAPTER XXII

"A PRAIRIE SCHOONER"

"It isn't those prospectors, is it?" inquired Tom in alarm, as Jim pulled the team up and we all stood up on the front board and looked back over the top of the wagon.

"What is it?" asked Tom, in amazement, "I can't for the life of me make out."

"It's something big and white, it's coming fast, too," remarked Jim.

"It's a white covered wagon running away," said Tom.

"It's somebody's wash got loose on the prairie wind," said Jim.

"It can't be a ghost this time of day," I said; "it must be a ship that thinks this is the Pacific Ocean, for that looks to me like a sail on a sloop."

As it happened, I guessed nearest to the truth.

"Whatever it is," said Jim in alarm, "it has the right of way and I'm going to get out of the road."

And he turned out to one side and faced the horses about towards the coming object. It was just as well that he got the team out of the road, for

the horses were terribly uneasy as they caught sight of the white-winged mystery bearing down on us.

It was all Jim could do to hold them as they plunged and reared. I had never seen them so frightened. Now it was about three hundred yards off, coming along the road at a great rate, almost as fast as a train would go and leaving a cloud of dust behind it.

"My goodness!" exclaimed Tom, "that's a wagon with a sail on it, and what do you think of that?"

Tom was right, it was a broad-tired wagon with a platform built over the running gear and a mast fitted in it with a sail attached.

"That's a prairie schooner for certain," laughed Jim, as it whirled by; we could see three men sitting on the deck, one steering and the other two holding ropes. They waved their hands at us and yelled:

"Pike's Peak or Bust," and then disappeared behind a cloud of dust. We had no time to exchange farewells with them for the horses were wild. Trying to stand on their heads one second and then doing their best to get away. Finally Black Carl fell down and got tangled in the harness and lay there panting and wild-eyed. Jim and Tom yanked him to his feet and by the time we got them to the road they had quieted down.

"There they go," said Tom, pointing to the distance.

We could see the white patch of sail on the road where it went over the ridge, then it disappeared.

"That's what I call traveling," said Tom. "It makes our gait seem pretty slow."

"Yes," I remarked, "but that's dangerous work going at that rate. Suppose they strike a rough place going full tilt, something is going to break!"

"Give me the horses every time," said Jim, "they may seem slow, but they are sure."

It was something over an hour when we reached the rise in the road, and from the ridge we saw a new horizon.

"I don't see a sign of those fellows," said Jim, "and their new-fangled sail boat."

"Maybe they have sunk," laughed Tom.

"More than likely they have run aground," I said.

We drove on rapidly down the gentle slope for several miles. Ahead of us was a break in the road made by a deep and narrow gully.

"There they are," exclaimed Tom.

"Who?" I asked.

"Why, those fellows, of course," he replied.

"It's the hare and the tortoise again," said Jim. Just as I had predicted, they had come to grief,

when they struck a bad place in the road. We went down to see what the trouble was, leaving Tom with the horses.

"Pike's Peak and busted," said Jim as we laid alongside of the wreck. "Is there anything we can do?"

The three men were of a different stripe than any we had met in the West and I did not care for their style at all, no more than for Cal Jenkins, though they came from a different class of society.

Two of the men were young bloods, evidently from a wealthy family and going West on a lark: the other was an elderly man, whom the others called Judge. He wore a broad sombrero and a long Prince Albert coat, and striped gray pants, strapped under his boots like Uncle Sam, as seen in the pictures. They did not seem to be worrying when we first saw them, as they were engaged in a card game.

"You think yourself all-fired funny, don't you, boy," said one of the young fellows. "We would like your horses to go back to River Bend and get help."

"You may like them a long time, but you don't get them," said Jim, bristling up.

"Then we will take them, won't we, Percy?" he said.

"To the devil with you and Percy," cried Jim,

white with anger — this was the first and only time I ever heard Jim express himself in that way.

"Hey, Tom," he yelled, "there's a couple of dudes here who are going to take our horses, you know what to do with horse thieves."

The fellow had a blue silk handkerchief around his neck and a fancy shirt on. At the sound of Jim's challenge he drew out a tiny silver-mounted pistol.

"Throw up your hands!" he commanded in quavering tones, and was about to level the thing at Jim, when the judge interfered.

"Put up that squirt gun, Spencer," he drawled, stepping between Jim and the young city sport.

"This is not an afternoon tea, my deah boy."

"Let him fire away, Judge," said Jim, "he won't hurt anybody with that thing."

"Now, my deah boys, we do not wish to quarrel with you, but we would like your valuable advice and assistance."

We thought he was probably guying us, but we could not tell, so we decided to be very polite ourselves.

"It would give us great pleasure, Judge," said Jim, "to lend you any assistance at our command."

I think Jim had read this out of a novel, it sounded to me like a quotation.

"Have you any old Bourbon whiskey?" asked the judge.

"Oh, is it that kind of help you want?" I said.

"No, but we have some Jamaica ginger, that's good for the stomach, too."

This seemed to amuse Spencer and Percy very much. They thought it was my innocence, when I was sarcastic. It was very hard to be misunderstood.

Meanwhile Jim was making a thorough examination of the wreck that blocked our way and then he brought in his verdict.

"It won't take long, Judge, to put that in shape; you need a splice for your mast, that's the main thing."

"Is that so, my young friend?" he said, amiably surprised; "you Yankees are certainly ingenious; that's a quality we Southerners lack."

Jim hurried back to the wagon and got a hammer and some nails and with my help he got the mast up and then took a look at the running gear.

"She's all shipshape now," he said, "the next thing is to get this thing out of the ditch, because she will certainly be becalmed here."

"That's so, Colonel, that's so," acquiesced the judge, who fell into the humor of the occasion, while Spencer and Percy held stiffly aloof; "we will launch her again, there is nothing like life on the

ocean wave, but how are we to get her out of the trough of the sea."

"That's a good one, Judge," laughed Jim, and the judge seemed pleased at the compliment. I think that he and Jim would have made good friends, for they were both born actors.

"We'll hitch onto the Mayflower," said Jim.

"Don't call her the Mayflower," expostulated the judge, "that's too Yankee a name. I'll christen her the 'Jeff Davis.'"

"All right," said Jim, "it's your boat, but she's apt to hang 'in irons.'" The judge slapped his knee.

"You young rascal," he said, and then burst into hearty laughter.

"Prairie schooner ahoy there!" Jim yelled to Tom, who was impatiently holding the horses, awaiting further developments. "We've got a tow here, cast loose your lines and steer over here."

"I'll give you a toe," retorted Tom, "if you don't come up here and lend a hand."

To prevent mutiny, we went to Tom's assistance and took off the whiffletree. We fastened it with some ropes to the front axle and managed to get the "Jeff Davis" after an hour's hard work to the top of the gully. We could only haul a foot or two at a time and it required constant blocking.

There was quite a breeze blowing from the East

and we supposed that they would start right off, but we did not know the judge and his partners, for they sat down to a card game.

"We have to finish this game," he said to us; "you know, my young friends, business before pleasure."

"We will be trotting along, then," said Jim. "Good-bye, Perce; good-bye, Spence. Don't shoot until we get out of range."

At which parting shot we trotted away, the judge waving his sombrero gracefully in farewell.

"Well, that's the beatingest crowd ever I saw," said Tom.

"I wonder what will become of them," I said, "they can't look after themselves. Somebody will always have to be picking them up."

"I am not going to worry," said Tom, "I guess the Indians will gather them in."

It would be a pity to have Spence and Perce scalped, now wouldn't it?" said Jim. "I'm afraid that they are too dangerous characters to be let loose in this peaceful country."

CHAPTER XXIII

A CLOSE CALL

WE went into camp that evening, near our old friend, the Arkansas River.

"We don't have to cross that again, do we?" I asked anxiously.

"Nixey," said Tom, "once is enough."

"It seems kind of good to be out in the open again," said Jim; "I guess we will be regular savages and never go inside of a house when we get back East. I'm in no hurry."

"The East is a good, comfortable place, after all," said Tom, "you always know what to expect there, plenty to eat and lots of pretty girls."

"It's a good place for old women," said Jim, contemptuously. "There's something in the world besides pretty girls and eating. What's moonlight on the river to crawling up on a band of antelope or chasing horse thieves. And what's the fun of setting up a tepee on a hill, where there's nothing fiercer than a flock of sheep in a thousand miles, or crawling on a trail through the brush pretending you're wild Indians and if a cat happens to meow,

the whole bunch would be scared cold. That's what the East is, ye Gods! it makes my blood run cold. Back there your very soul gets hide bound."

"They have got all the money in the East," I said, "and that's what counts."

"Yes," retorted Jim, "if that's what you count."

"You think you are a hot orator, quoting from Shakespeare and never giving the old gent credit. You stay here in the Woolly West for a while and when you get back the East won't own you," said Tom, witheringly.

"What do I care," replied the untrameled Jim, with cold indifference.

"Yes, and when you grow up out here, you won't know how to act in Society. You will trip the girls up when you try to dance with them and like as not wear a dress suit to luncheon and order the champagne with the roast beef and make Jo and I ashamed of you."

"Terrible! terrible!" exclaimed Jim, "I'll have a leetle more of that thar bacon, Mr. Percival Givell, and you can pour me out a little more of that Arkansas champagne, because I'm feeling extra dry and I always take champagne with the bacon course. "Gentlemen," he said, raising his tin cup, with gallant grace, "I drink to the combined health of the yeasty East and the Woolly West," and then he sat gracefully down on—the ground. Tom

having surreptiously removed the soap box on which Jim had been sitting.

This brought the intersectional discussion to an abrupt close. Shortly after supper we turned in for the night, I sleeping in the wagon as usual and the other two boys in the tent. I had been asleep about a couple of hours when Ben woke me up, barking furiously.

I hurried to get out, because I remembered our experience with the horsethieves and I was afraid that some one was trying to make off with them. I looked anxiously out and saw that they were all right where we had lariatied them down by the river, but they were evidently frightened at something they saw in the darkness, because they were stirring uneasily and were looking beyond the camp with their heads up and ears pricked forward.

Ben was barking in the same direction and then for the first time in my unhaunted life I saw a ghost. It was some distance off, moving silently and swiftly along, wrapt in its ghostly shroud and, strange to say, at its feet were two lights. I never had heard that ghosts carried lights on dark nights to show them the way.

I called excitedly to Tom and Jim: "Wake up, boys, there's a ghost coming."

They tumbled out of the tent with tousled heads.

"What's the fuss now?" asked Tom, gruffly.

"That's what it is. See over there," I cried, "that's a ghost, or I'll eat my hat."

"It does look funny," said Tom, "I wonder what it is."

"If it comes our way, I'm going to shoot," I said, getting my rifle ready.

"Hold on," exclaimed Jim, "I know what it is. It's the good ship 'Jeff Davis,' sailing through the night."

"Ship ahoy," yelled Tom, as it came in line with us.

"Thow up your hands," yelled Jim.

"Duck," I cried, as two tiny flashes punctured the darkness.

"It's Percy and Spencer," cried Jim, "and they have unlimbered their cannon. Let's give 'em a send off."

Then our three rifles rang out with their sharp, swift challenge, over the heads of the Argonauts.

"Just see them sputter," laughed Jim as there came a succession of weak flashes from the toy pistols. Then came a streak of flame from the side of "The Jeff Davis," and a sharp, singing sound.

"Look out," exclaimed Jim, "the judge is in action."

Then we ducked for sure and took shelter behind a bank until the "Jeff Davis" had sailed out of range.

"Those fools will kill themselves," said Tom, "running full speed at night in this part of Kansas."

"I'm going to bed," said Jim, "until the next ghost comes along."

"Where are the horses?" I asked in alarm.

"I guess that they are down there by the river, all right," said Jim, uneasily.

"We will soon find out," said Tom, taking the lead, and we hastened after him, only to find the horses gone. They had become thoroughly frightened by the sight of the moving ghost and had pulled up the iron lariat pins and disappeared.

"I hope they don't take it into their heads to go home," I said.

"It would be a nice fifteen hundred-mile walk," said Jim, encouragingly.

"It wouldn't surprise me a bit if they had gone back to Mr. Hoskins," said Tom.

"The best way to find out is to get started," said Jim.

It was not difficult to follow the trail of the rope and the pin, until we came to the place where the horses had struck the road, going east and then the trail was easy enough to follow. After we had gone a quarter of a mile, a sudden thought made me stop.

"I don't believe, boys, that it is safe to leave the camp alone," I said.

"That's so," agreed Tom.

"Who will go back," said Jim, "I guess that it's Jo's turn to stay with the goods."

"I don't see why I have to," I demurred.

"All those in favor of Mr. Joseph Darlington being chairman of the house guard committee, say aye."

"Aye," shouted Tom.

"Aye," echoed Jim.

"No," I shouted, "anyway, I take Ben."

The boys left me to take up the trail again. Alone except for the dog I took my way back. For some reason I did not want to go to the camp. I felt nervous and apprehensive and it seemed terribly lonely. It was now verging toward midnight and the stars shone unobscured. I seemed utterly alone with nothing but the stars overhead and the vagrant wind moaning over the shadowy plains.

As I drew near the camp I could see the white of the tent and the bulk of the wagon a few feet away. Then I stopped while the blood seemed to freeze in my veins and around my heart, for I thought I saw a light in the tent just as though some one had struck a match for a second. I decided that it must be a firefly, still I approached the camp with great caution. It was the first time that I had been left

without either Tom or Jim to rely on in case of an emergency and I did not like it.

I could have sworn that there was something dangerous lurking in that camp. I felt the presence of it, though I could not see it. There seemed to be something underneath the wagon like the bent form of a man crouching down. Carefully I crawled towards it, keeping on the alert. The form was dark, but the man seemed to have yellow hair. "Get out of there," I warned, "or I'll shoot," and the man did not budge. By this time I had reached the end of the wagon and found out to my relief that what I supposed was a man, was a clump of yellow-headed sunflowers, bent underneath the wagon.

I laughed, but still I could not help but feel that there was something or somebody around or in the camp. It was not the fright of a boy alone in the dark, but a curious sense of another presence that I could not see, but feel. I was partially under the wagon when I cautiously turned my head and I saw coming towards me a figure on all fours, not more than fifty feet away. At first I thought it was an animal and then I saw it for what it was, creeping stealthily towards me, yet there was something of the sleek skill of the panther in its approach.

As I moved it dropped to the ground and there

was not a hint of its presence. No sooner had this happened than I sprang from under the wagon, as quick as a flash I ran around to the front and tumbled into the welcome darkness of the interior. I knew that the man had followed me with the quickness of the wild animal, but with the start I had, I was too swift for him and for the moment he was baffled. Then came a time of terrible suspense and waiting.

I did not know exactly where he was in the darkness, but I was sure that he could not attack me from the front of the wagon for I was ready for him, with the revolver, and if that failed me the bowie knife was ready to my hand.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE SIGN OF THE BOWIE KNIFE

AN hour must have passed in this intense waiting. Occasionally a sound outside made me suspicious that the man was about to make a move, but it might have been just the wind rustling the grasses. Then I heard a most welcome sound.

At first I was hardly willing to believe my ears, then I was sure that it was the sound of horses' hoofs and next came the tones of Tom's voice and Jim's. I fired one shot to attract their attention, then I cleared out of that wagon in one jump. All my pent-up energy going into one decisive action. I was determined to flush that fellow out. The miserable scoundrel who would have sneaked up behind me and stuck his knife into my back.

No sooner had I struck the ground, than I stumbled and the pistol flew out of my hand. I had no time to hunt for it in the darkness. I turned instinctively to the back of the wagon and there that rascal was, dodging off like a scared shadow, evidently expecting to be fired at, but all I could do

was to chase after him and that I did with a right good will.

He seemed not to run but just to glide, fast as the wind but I seemed to gain on him as he ran for the river. Once he turned and with a flash something left his hand. I dodged instinctively and it swished by my ear. What it was I could not tell. I knew the river must stop him and I redoubled my efforts to bring him to bay. Behind me I could hear Tom and Jim galloping furiously.

Then the man reached the bank of the river and I knew I had him, because no one would dare those fatal quicksands. Then to my utter astonishment, he ran straight into the river. For the moment I was paralysed, looking for him to sink but he seemed simply to glide over the surface, occasionally I would hear through the darkness the splash of water, in a half minute he had disappeared. Tom and Jim came down the slope full tilt and almost went head first into the river.

"What in thunder is all this excitement about, Jo?" cried Tom.

"Can't we leave you alone for a few minutes without you getting up a celebration?" inquired Jim.

"Did you see that fellow running?" I asked.

"Sure, we saw him take to the river," said Tom, "what was his hurry?"

"When I came back to the wagon he was lying in wait for me and tried to slip up behind me and stick me in the back."

"Whew!" whistled Jim, "tell us about it."

"Where did you find the horses?" I asked.

"Never mind about that now, we will tell you later. You spin your yarn."

So I told them and wound up by saying that the next time they wanted to leave me alone, I wouldn't stay.

"Ha, ha," laughed Jim, "that's the Irish of it."

"No," I said, "it is the straight of it."

"Did you get a close enough view, to see what kind of a looking chap he was?" asked Tom.

"No, I didn't see his face, but there was something familiar about him, especially his run."

Then it came over me in a flash. "Great Heavens! boys," I exclaimed, "I know who it was. It was that Indian."

"By Jove, I wouldn't be a bit surprised," said Tom, "the sneaking, dirty dog was lying in wait to get even."

"That's who it was," I confirmed, "just his height and there is no mistaking that run. No wonder I could not catch him."

"He is so quick and light-footed, that he could cross the river and never sink," said Jim.

"Sometime or other we will run across that

scamp and either he will get us or we will get him, you see," prophesied Tom.

"Now I have told you my yarn, let's hear about the horses," I said.

"There's nothing exciting about that, except riding bareback and charging down to the river to catch your friend, the Indian," said Tom. "You see we followed the trail back about three or four miles and we found Bill quietly grazing near the road, while Black Carl had got the lariat wound around a soap weed and had come to a sudden stop. So we got aboard and came back toward the camp, and heard you fire a salute in our honor."

"There's one thing certain," I said, "I'm not going to sleep in that wagon to-night. It's up to either one of you."

"All right," said Jim, "I'll sleep there. I don't blame you for feeling a little bit scary. It wasn't a very pleasant experience."

And so it was arranged.

The next morning I went out to examine the battleground of the night before and to see what traces I could find of my friend, the enemy. The boys went with me on the search.

"It was right around here that he flung that thing at me," I said.

"You don't suppose that it was an arrow?" queried Tom.

"I don't know exactly what it was," I said, "except that it whizzed darn close to my ear."

"Hello," exclaimed Jim, stooping and picking up something. We hurried to see what it was.

"Gee, it's a knife," I said, "it's a wicked looking thing."

"It sure is," said Tom, taking it in hand.

We all inspected it with intense interest, because we felt sure that it had a sinister history. It was two-edged, like a dagger, with a groove down the center. The handle was of brown bone carved with the mystic symbols that the Indians of the plains used.

"I'm glad to have found this knife," said Jim, "won't it make the boys open their eyes back home, when I show it to them, especially when they hear that it belonged to a real Indian and I bet the girls would scream if you pointed it at them."

"Oh, I say," I remonstrated, when I got over my astonishment, "I guess that knife belongs to me."

"Well, you guess wrong," said Jim, decisively, "I found it and I am going to keep it."

"But the Indian tried to give it to me," I replied, whimsically, "and it was my risk and I think you have a pretty cool nerve to want to keep it."

"Well, I'm agoing to, what will you do about it?" proposed Jim.

"I'll take it away from you, that's what I will do," and I advanced to the attack.

"Hold on," said Tom, "don't you boys get into a fight. Don't we have enough trouble on the outside without you making home unhappy this way? I'll toss up; the best two out of three."

We objected to this method for some time, for we each felt sure of the right of his own case, but we finally submitted to arbitration.

"Heads or tails," said Tom, tossing the penny into the air.

"Tails," cried Jim.

We bent over intently.

"Heads it was," said Tom. "Now Jo?"

"Heads."

"Tails it is," chanted Tom.

This was the decisive moment. The coin turned over and over in the air.

"Tails," cried Jim.

"Hurrah," I cried, "it's heads and an Indian's head right there on the penny."

Jim gave it up in disgust, and sulked for a half a day, and would not speak to either Tom or I. How I did enjoy carrying that knife and it gave me a peculiar distinction that Mr. Bowie himself must have been conscious of when he first wore the weapon named in his honor.

I always had it with me, carrying it in an orna-

mental sheath attached to my belt on the right side, near the hip. Often I would take it out of the leather sheath and study the curious work on the handle. That it had a history no one could doubt. For all I knew it might have belonged to some Texas scout or other ranger, for the bone handle was characteristic of their weapons. If the Indians had captured it, they had no doubt carved the handle after their own fashion. It was to be of help to me on more than one occasion. How do I know but it may sometime in the future be turned against the renegade Indian who threw it at me.

CHAPTER XXV

THE CYCLONE

WHEN we started again, it was an unusually warm, close atmosphere that surrounded us.

"I wonder what is the matter," growled Tom, "it's so hot that it makes me sweat sitting still. I think that we must be near a prairie fire."

"You are a great reasoner, Tom," laughed Jim. "Do you imagine that you draw up to a prairie as to a stove and warm your toes."

"You can be sure of one thing," I put in; "that if there is a prairie fire coming that we will have some warning in the way of smoke."

"I am sure of one thing," said Tom, "that something is going to happen."

"Nothing very perilous, I guess," replied Jim, "perhaps you will catch cold in your head from having your mouth open or something like that."

"You need not be so funny," retorted Tom, "you just wait and see."

"Draw near and listen to the Great Weather Prophet," cried Jim in his most oratorical manner.

"It is a queer sort of a day," I said, affected by Tom's prognostications, "the clouds look so murky."

"You are a joyful pair," snorted Jim. "If Tom squints then Jo does the same."

But it is an axiom that no prophet is appreciated by his own relatives. We drove on slowly because the horses seemed tired and were wet with sweat, and where the harness worked on their bodies there was white lather.

"I believe we will have a thunder-storm," said Jim after a while.

"So you are going to do some prophesying yourself," sneered Tom, "perhaps you will find that Jo and I are not such fools after all."

"No, you are **not** fools," said Jim, "only twins."

"It's lucky you aren't twins," said Tom with vehemence, "because one of you is enough."

"You can't have too much of a good thing," laughed Jim, "I guess the weather has made you hot too."

"There is something in that," I said, "the weather does have a whole lot to do with one's temper."

"That's all nonsense," said Jim, "people get cross and then blame it on the weather."

"You needn't tell me," said Tom doggedly,

"that the weather doesn't affect you. It stands to reason that if it is cloudy it makes you feel gloomy and if the sun shines then it cheers you up."

"You ought to go into the lecture business, Tom," grunted Jim, "there is no use wasting your talents on this desert air."

"Or on this 'ere desert," I said.

"Get up, Bill! Get up, Carl!" urged Jim. "We must hurry and get these lunatics to an insane asylum. The heat has affected their minds."

"Look up north, boys," I cried, "there is something going to happen. Just look at those black clouds boiling up."

"The wind is certainly having a dance with them," remarked Jim, "just stirring them around and around."

"Let's hurry and get out of the way," exclaimed Tom.

"Where shall we hurry to?" I said. "One place is as good as another if a storm strikes us; we can't dodge it."

"I can see some ranche buildings," said Tom, "about two miles off. Perhaps we can reach them."

"Are you sure that it is a ranche," said Jim, "maybe it's just a mirage."

"I bet it isn't a mirage," replied Tom, "I guess I can see."

But we did not have time to reach the desired haven, and perhaps it was just as well as it turned out.

"Look out, here she comes!" yelled Jim.

There was no question about its coming. The black clouds were whirling faster and faster and were forming in a funnel shape, the small end touching the earth and then lifting and striking again.

"It's a hurricane!" I exclaimed in alarm.

"No, it's a cyclone!" cried Tom. "If it strikes here it will be all up with us."

"Up sure enough," grinned Jim, "just about two hundred feet up."

It was coming down on us faster than the winds, the broad upper part of the funnel whirling among the high clouds. There was a curious bronze glare of light covering the whole plains.

"What shall we do?" cried Tom.

"Get out of the way as much as possible," said Jim.

The whirling funnel was bearing down directly on the ranche.

"I hope that the place is deserted," I said.

"It would be if I was there," said Tom, his teeth chattering in spite of the heat of which he had complained.

The cyclone was sweeping down upon the

doomed ranche. Then with a terrific whirl we saw the house and barn sucked up into the whirling vortex. Bodily it seemed for a ways. There was a gigantic humor about it, as it toyed with the structures snatched from the earth.

On the upper stratum of the cyclone loose boards were flying. It was coming down upon us. Talk about an express train. There was no comparison. When the elements go absolutely crazy there is something terrible beyond expression. The clouds and the winds were frenzied in their furious waltz.

Jim stood up in the front of the wagon, whipping the horses with the blacksnake.

"Get out of this," he yelled, and there was a fierce excitement in his voice.

Tom and I hung frantically to the bottom of the wagon.

Away we went, streaking it across the prairie. The horses at full gallop, the wagon jouncing and swaying. Then with a roar like ten Niagaras the cyclone swept by and we were caught on its outer skirts.

In a jiffy our wagon was turned over and the horses too. Tom and I were scrambling like a couple of frightened cats in the canvas top of our wagon and Jim had disappeared.

A curious silence was over all the prairie. The

sun was shining and the cyclone was whirling miles away on its mad path of destruction.

"Come, boys, it is time to get up." It was Jim's voice.

"Where are we?" I asked in trembling tones.

"Kansas," said Jim laconically. "Did you think it was heaven?"

"Feared it might be the other place," I answered.

"Seems like it after that hellabullo," said Tom, as he crawled out. I followed suit.

"My! how quiet it is," I said, looking around.

"Yes, the sun is shining," remarked Jim, "and the little birds are chirping in the trees. Look out, here comes a board."

We looked up and saw it come sailing down out of a clear sky. Then it struck about twenty feet away from us.

"That will do nicely for kindling," said Jim, "it's an ill wind that blows nobody good."

"Well, I suppose things are all smashed to pieces," said Tom, sorrowfully.

"No," said Jim, "but come, lend a hand and let's get things righted."

The horses were flat on their sides, tangled in the harness and had given up trying to kick themselves loose, so that they were easier to handle.

We tugged and yanked and pulled. Finally we got them right side up with care. They stood

trembling from their fright, but perfectly manageable.

"Get the picket ropes," ordered Jim, "and we will lariat them out while we get the wagon up."

"How are we going to manage it?" asked Tom dubiously. "It's too heavy; we will have to get help."

"Help nothing," growled Jim, "where could we get help in this country. I suppose we might wait for another cyclone to come along and pick us up."

"Perhaps we could hitch the horses to it and pull it up," I said.

"I don't see how you can get a purchase on it to do that," protested Jim.

We walked around our capsized prairie schooner, viewing it from all sides. It did seem to be rather a hopeless situation. At least it was a difficult problem for three boys alone on the big prairie with the only ranche in sight just taken up into the clouds.

"There is just one way," said Jim finally, "and that is to take everything out of the wagon box." This we did.

"Now we must yank that box away from the running gear."

This was not so difficult after the provisions, bedding, etc., had been removed.

"Now we can right the running gear," said the Boss.

So we got the wagon up on its pins, I mean its wheels, again.

"Now all hands get hold of the box," he directed.

This was the hardest of all. Together we got the hind end of the box poised on the back wheel.

"Tom, you steady it while Jo and I lift the front end on," he said.

It was heavy, I tell you, but we managed to lift the box clear of the front wheels and drop it into position. Then we went to Tom's assistance and lifted the other end over the hind wheels and put it down straight and the worst of our task was over.

"The harness needs some mending and then we will be ready to start," said Jim.

"I hope that will be our last cyclone," I said, "once is enough."

"Maybe you fellows will laugh at me again," said Tom in melancholy triumph. "Didn't I tell you what would happen?"

"You did, Tommy, you did," acquiesced Jim, "and the next time you predict anything as bad as that, I will have to punish you."

"What happened to you, Jim, when it struck?" I asked. "I didn't see you."

"You couldn't very well," grinned Jim, "as you were holding on tight to the bottom of the wagon with your eyes shut."

"I thought I would see enough," I replied, "when the cyclone took me upstairs."

"If it had not been for my fast driving, it would have struck us all right," said Jim; "it would have been a comical sight to have seen you and Tom soaring around like little birdies with your coat-tails spread out."

"You haven't told us what happened to you," I replied severely.

"Oh, when it hit us I just flew out of the front of the wagon and took a few turns on the prairie. You would have laughed to have seen Ben. He was going around in circles about ten feet off from the ground and his feet spread out like a scared cat and he was howling to beat the wind."

"I bet his hair turned white in a single second," I said.

"Except what was blown off," put in Tom.

We finally persuaded Ben to come out from under the wagon, where he had taken refuge, but he did not seem to be especially damaged, except his feelings, which had evidently undergone a severe shock. He howled like a good fellow when we laid hands on him.

"What makes a cyclone?" I asked.

"I didn't have time to examine this one," said Jim, "it came and went too quick. I guess it's the Devil that makes 'em."

"I have read that cyclones will take the water right out of the stream," said Tom.

"They must get pretty thirsty in Kansas," said Jim.

"I have heard, too, that they will cut a house square in two, just as slick as if it had been done with a knife."

"It is a kind of buzz-saw effect," said Jim. "There's no denying that."

"Let's drive over to the ranche and see what's left," said Tom.

"Mostly ground I guess," said Jim.

So we drove across country to see if our nearest neighbors needed any assistance. We looked carefully, but there was no vestige of house or barn or fences. There were only two bare spots where the house and barn had stood a short time before.

We looked around carefully, but could find no sign of any human being around.

"Hello," cried Jim, pointing back of us and into the air. "Here comes Grandpa Sikes floating back to his ranche."

We gazed upward in great alarm and awe.

"Where, where?" we cried.

Jim rolled on the ground in a paroxysm of laughter.

"Oh dear, dear, you two innocents will be the death of me," and he went into another convulsion.

While he was in this helpless state we sat on him and pummelled him good.

"That will do, boys; that will do," he said, throwing us off, "you have had enough exercise for one day."

"We will make you think that a cyclone has struck you for fair," said Tom, "if you try any more of your fool jokes on us."

"Grandpa Sikes was a good one," chuckled Jim, "I don't know what would happen to you boys if I wasn't along to take care of you. You need a guardian."

"You'll need a doctor if you get too funny," growled Tom.

"Now, Tommy, don't get excited," warned Jim, "the weather is quite cool and there is no excuse for your getting hot. You must be governed by the weather, you know."

To this the exasperated Tom had nothing to say. He was speechless, which was a very unusual condition for him.

"There is no use waiting any longer for Grand-

pa Sikes," said Jim, "we might just as well be starting west."

"Yes, we will be soon near the mountains and we won't be bothered then."

"But there will be Indians," said Tom, "and they are worse."

Both statements were true.

CHAPTER XXVI

OUR FIRST ANTELOPE

WE were getting into the country where the game was more abundant and it seemed like the real West. One day Jim sighted a herd of fifteen or twenty antelope a mile and a half to the north of us.

"You can stay with the wagon, Jo," Jim said, "and we will drive the herd down your way."

"All right," I said, "then I will corral them."

"Better drive the wagon down in the gully out of sight," said Tom.

This was done and the two boys, taking their rifles, crawled over the ridge and were soon lost to sight. It was hot down in the shallow arroyo, so I shoved the seat back in the wagon, out of the sun, and lay down on it with my knees up and my hat over my eyes, thinking over the past with its incidents and adventures, and then my mind wandered home and I wondered what the folks were doing and how long it would be before we saw them again. I must have laid there for a half hour, and was almost asleep when I heard the sound of dis-

tant shots and then I sat lazily up on the seat, but in two minutes I was wide awake, and jumped for my rifle. There along the ridge running one behind the other were six antelope, moving in a semi-circle, their legs going with the combined speed of chain lightning and their heads in the air.

I jumped to the ground and began firing in rapid succession. I aimed at the big buck in the lead but the bullet struck the dirt this side of him and my next shot went high. The last in line was a young doe, and I aimed just back of the shoulder and the antelope fell in a huddled heap. How proud and elated I felt as I ran to where it lay.

It was the first antelope I had seen nearby. The hair was long and coarse, changing from rather a dark gray to lighter at the ends. The eyes were brown and bulgy. The rump was covered with white hair. This was always the signal as a herd took flight and disappeared. It was as though they waved good-byes with white handkerchief and it was sure enough good-bye for if they once took fright they were off like the wind. You could see their speed in the shape of the legs. They were remarkably slender, with little hoofs. The muscles must have been like steel wire.

I wondered if the boys had better luck than I had. Leastways I was going to surprise them. So I drove the wagon up as close to the antelope as

the horses would go, for they were afraid of it, and began to snort and shy as soon as they smelled the blood.

As I lifted it to put it in the front of the wagon, they started to run and I dropped the antelope and took after them. The lines were trailing on the ground and before they got under full headway I grabbed the reins and jabbing my heels into the ground, I pulled and yanked but they dragged me fifteen or twenty feet before I got them stopped. Then I made them go around in a circle till I brought them to the place they had started from. They were so nervous and shifty that I did not dare to try the experiment of putting the antelope in the front of the wagon, so I unfastened the iron rod in the end gate and taking it out, I got, after much effort, the antelope into the back of the wagon under the bed.

I was in a hurry, for I did not want the boys to get back before I had my prize safely hidden. I had just got back on the seat when I saw them bobbing serenely over the ridge.

"Hello, boys," I yelled, "I suppose you have got a wagon-load of antelope."

But I could tell by their subdued manner that they had not had much luck.

"They got wind of us," explained Tom, as he came up, "and we only got some chance shots."

"You ought to have let me come along," I said, "and I could have picked one off for you."

"Oh, yes," laughed Jim, sarcastically, "you're a grand shot. You had better stick to your bowie knife and leave Tom and me to do the heavy firing."

"Yes, I know," I said, "that you are two wonders. Well, I'll watch you miss antelope until I learn how."

I retired to the back of the wagon, while Jim and Tom sat on the front seat. Unobserved, I managed to drag the animal from the bed and shoved it under the boys' feet. Tom happened to look down and saw the brown, staring eyes looking up at him. My! how he did jump and Jim followed suit.

"Gee whillikins! What is that?" Tom cried, as he tucked his feet upon the seat.

"Be careful, girls," I laughed, "it's a mouse." Then they recognized what it was.

"Where in thunder did you get it?" asked Tom.

"Killed it," I said, "did you think that I had bought it at a butcher shop?" They could scarcely believe their eyes.

"Ha, ha," I laughed, "you are mighty hunters. Teach me, will you? When I get time I will give you a few lessons."

Though they felt chagrined, still they kept good natured under my bantering, because they were

pleased to have a chance to try what an antelope steak tasted like.

We had now left the region of the Arkansas River, and were once more on the main overland route. It was now the middle of July and the plains were sizzling hot. We had not come across any water since morning and were suffering from thirst.

"Would you rather die of hunger or thirst?" asked Tom.

"Hunger," I said, because I did not feel like eating just then.

"I tell you what I would like to have and that is a glass of sarsaparilla with cracked ice in it," said Jim.

"Give me a bottle of ginger ale right out of the refrigerator on the back porch," said Tom. "What's your order, Jo?"

"You can give me some warm Arkansas ale off the sands," I said, "it would taste all right."

But honestly, boys, I don't believe there is any torture like that of thirst. Especially in mid-summer on the scorching plains and in an uncertain state of mind, as to when you were to strike water again. The horses were beginning to feel the need of it. They went along at a fagged, discouraged trot, the salty sweat white under the harness.

"Hurrah, boys," yelled Jim, "there's a lake ahead of us and some trees around it."

"Where?" Tom and I questioned, eagerly.

"There, don't you see, about two miles off, and to the right of the road."

"Yes, we see it," exclaimed Tom and I together.

"Won't it be fine to take a swim, when we get there," said Jim, enthusiastically. "We haven't been in the water since we left Missouri."

"Those trees look beautiful, too," I said, "and it will be nice to rest in the shade of the trees."

"That water is a beautiful blue," remarked Tom, "almost like the ocean."

So we traveled on in high spirits, much refreshed by the sight of the lake ahead. We drove and drove and still it kept at the same distance from us.

"Why, that's funny," said Jim, "we don't seem to get any closer to it."

Then the miserable truth dawned upon us.

"I know why that lake don't get any nearer. It's because it's a mirage," said Tom. "Just exactly like we have studied about in our geographies."

Our disappointment was bitter, as bitter as our thirst, but still we could not help but look in curiosity at this strange and beautiful sight, framed in the shimmering waves of heat that seemed to undu-

late towards the horizon. That evening the sun went down angrily in the haze, a red ball of flame.

We had to make a dry camp that night and it is hard to make you realize the discomfort and misery of it. We could eat nothing with relish for our mouths were dry and parched. The horses stood with sadly drooping heads, not caring to graze. Jim was the most resourceful and undaunted, while Tom was gloomy and I was inclined to be peevish.

"I'm not going to mope around, I am going to find water," he said decisively.

"Perhaps you can discover another lake," I said caustically.

"Anyway, if I don't, I will try for an artesian well."

And he went to the wagon and got the pick and shovel, which we were going to use in our mining operations, when we got out in the mountains of Colorado.

"I'll take the shovel," I said, "but where are you going to dig? This looks hard and dry as a brick around here."

"We will have to prospect some," said Jim, "it looks like lower ground down there; we will have a look at it."

After looking carefully around Jim quickly seized on a certain spot.

"Here's the place," he said, "where this wire

grass grows. It looks like there might be some chance."

So he peeled off his gray flannel shirt, threw his hat on the ground, and began to dig in with the pick and I hastily threw the dirt out. When we had gone down two feet the earth began to get damp and in a short time the water began to ooze up and we got enough for ourselves and the horses. It certainly tasted good after our long fast. We had also learned something of value and importance and that the dark green wire grass was a sure sign of water, which was a good thing to know in a thirsty land.

Even in these late days some of you boys might be traveling and camping out in a country where water is scarce and it will be well to know all the signs and indications of water.

"I have heard of people," said Tom, that evening, "who could tell where water was with a stick."

"How, I should like to know?" I said.

"You remember that old farmer, who lived over the hill from us. The one who had that fierce Jersey bull?"

"Yes, I recollect how we used to get the bull on the rampage, waving things at him and then make for the fence."

"He told me that he could find water on his place

by cutting an apple stick and carrying it in his hands and when he came to a place where there was water the stick would turn in his hand and sometimes almost twist out of it. Then he would dig and find water without any trouble."

"I have tried that," declared Jim, "and it don't work. We would wait a jolly long time here in Kansas before we would find an apple tree to cut a stick off from, to find water."

"I believe some people can do that," I said, "it depends on the person. Just like some people can move tables with their hands on them."

"May be so," said Jim, "but out here in Kansas give me the wire grass."

CHAPTER XXVII

THE STRANGE MAN

THE next morning we went to see how our well was and found it quite full of water.

"We ought to mark this in some way so that if anybody should come along here they could locate it," said Jim.

"I don't know what we can use," said Tom, "there's no boards or anything of the kind."

"The best we can do is to tie this white rag to that tall sunflower stock," said Jim, "and perhaps someone will come along with more wood than we have and set up a sign."

"I tell you, Jim," I said, "put this tin can up there and then they will be more than likely to recognize what the sign is for."

"We will have to put up a bottle," laughed Jim, "for the judge won't recognize anything else."

This being done we started on the road again. Every once in a while we scanned the western horizon expecting to see the big range rise up before which was the goal of our travels. We were:

anxious to see who would be the first to sight them. Tom stood the best chance because his keen gray eyes were like a sailor's and could see things at a great distance.

One afternoon I was driving and the two boys were lying in the back of the wagon dozing. It was not so hot as you might think, under the canvas, for the back of the wagon was open and there was quite a draught through and it was quite luxurious to lie back there while the horses jogged gently along. And many a pleasant day dream did we indulge in of what we would do when we returned home. How glad we would be to see the folks and how proud they would be to see their boys, who had been through so many perils on the plains and in the mountains.

I dare say Tom and Jim were indulging in some such reverie when I disturbed them.

"Hip-hurrah," I cried, standing up on the wagon seat and waving my hat. "There are the mountains, hurrah!"

"What's the fuss now," said Tom, getting up and coming rapidly to the front.

"Where are the mountains?" questioned Jim.

"Don't you see, right ahead there," I said, pointing with an excited forefinger.

"It does look kind of like 'em," Jim said, "with snow on top."

Tom now got on the bridge and with his hand shading his eyes, scanned the horizon carefully.

"Ho, ho!" he laughed, derisively, "your mountains are nothing but clouds."

"Get out," I said, angrily, "of course it is the mountains. It's about time we saw them."

"Yes, just as much mountains as that lake was water, that we saw."

Tom was right, for what my excited imagination took for mountains were really clouds. But it was not so ludicrous a mistake as you might think, for often afterwards we saw distant ranges of snow-capped mountains that looked as fair and white and insubstantial as summer clouds.

"I guess if you are going to see so many things that ain't visible, that I will do the driving," said Tom, "there's no telling what you may run us into."

"I don't care about driving all the time," I said, "you are getting entirely too fat lolling around. What's the number of my section, Portah, anyway?"

"You have lower eight," he grinned, "also occupied by the gentleman with the loud snore and the cowhide boots."

"I hope he don't kick in his sleep," I said, "that's all."

Being in a facetious mood, I tried to pull the

gent's boots off, but he resisted vigorously. And soon we were engaged in a rough and tumble rolling over and over. Finally I got Jim on his back, for I was pretty active, though Jim was the older. I could see Jim was mad, the way he had his teeth clinched and I ought to have been more on my guard. Suddenly he brought his knees up against my chest and gave a tremendous shove and back I went out of the wagon into the dust of the road.

The horses were trotting pretty fast and it was a hard fall I tell you, and it jarred the breath completely out of me. Tom stopped the horses as quick as he could, and he and Jim ran back in a hurry. They were scared, too, because I was too stunned to get up right away.

"You ain't hurt, are you, Jo?" asked Jim, solicitously, "I didn't go to kick you so far."

Tom began to render first aid to the injured after ascertaining that I had no bones broken. I objected to his methods as best I could.

"I ain't drowning, leave me be," I protested, feebly.

You see, Tom only knew the method of restoring the drowned to consciousness, and he had to use it on me. It was the same principle as that employed by the old Missouri doctor, who only knew how to cure fits, so he would throw his patients into fits, then cure the fits. In about ten minutes I was

pretty well restored, due more to the ruggedness of my natural constitution than to Tom's heroic treatment, which I was not heroic enough to stand for.

But I was quite willing to lie perfectly quiet in the back of the wagon, and not mix it with brother Jim, who was likewise willing to leave me alone, as I had been so good natured as not to break my neck or a leg when he kicked me out of the end of the wagon. So thereafter we conversed quite amiably for awhile.

"What will you do when we get home, Jim?" I asked.

"Come back West," he replied, laconically.

"I should like to get back just in time to see the big baseball game between our school and the Morris High. Wouldn't it be a surprise to them though?"

"Oh, I know you," grinned Jim, "you want to be the conquering hero style. You will stride into the arena in top boots and rough corduroy suit, your face bronzed with the suns of many deserts. Then all the girls will sit up and ask who is that dark and fascinating stranger. Then somebody will say:

"Oh, don't you know, that's Jo Darlington, just come back from the Wild West. How sweet he looks in that suit."

"Just too lovely."

"Not for me. No, no, never," and Jim put up a protesting hand.

"You needn't worry," I said, "nobody will pay any attention to you when I'm around."

"I've half a mind to kick you out again," warned Jim.

After that the conversation ceased and we were dozing contentedly and peacefully. When suddenly a terrific scream or yell broke the somnolent silence. It seemed to come from the back of the wagon.

"Great Heavens, what was it?" I asked.

"It was some sort of a man, I just got sight of him as he jumped up. My but he was a fright."

"Where's he gone to?" I asked.

Then as if in answer to my question there came a long drawn out peculiar moan, almost like the cry of some wild animal.

"What are you afraid of?" cried Tom, putting on the brake hard and jumping out from the front, then Jim and I scrambled out of the back and onto the ground in a hurry.

We were just in time to see Tom get bowled over by a man with long, flying hair, barefoot, with a ragged shirt and his pants held by a rope around his waist. We were all out of the wagon and with a wonderful quickness the man sprang into the front seat and started the horses off.

It was one of the worst situations that we had ever got in. For if he got away with our team we were left without food, or water or even our rifles on the lonely and inhospitable plains. Fortunately the brakes held back the wagon some, though they were not on hard, yet it was down grade and the horses were frightened as the man yelled to them wildly.

I sprang forward instantly in pursuit. Never in all my different experiences did I run so fast. I simply flew over the ground. As soon as I got going I began to overhaul the flying wagon. I did not have time to think of what I would do when I caught up with it. I caught up with it in about three hundred yards and pulled myself into the back of the wagon. The man was standing up on the seat, driving like mad, and looking back, but he had not seen me climb into the back of the wagon, nor could he hear me, on account of the rattling.

I sprang for him, throwing him into the back of the wagon, and yanking the horses to a stop. This was lucky for it gave Jim a chance to come up, for he was about a hundred feet behind when I reached the wagon. The man was up in an instant and with a terrible grip he had pulled me back into the wagon. I struggled in fury and fright.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE OVERLAND

I AM not apt to forget that man as he struggled to get me by the throat. His grip was like iron. He had more than an ordinary man's strength. I used every trick I knew to get free but he finally got his knee on my chest. Would Jim never come? Then he came tearing into the wagon like a cannon ball. Seizing the heavy whip he brought the butt end down on the man's head with all his strength and the fellow swayed, stunned, and Jim was on him like a tiger, bearing him to the floor.

I got up breathless, but fiercely determined.

"Here, Jim," I cried, "we will tie him with this rope."

Jim did not have to be urged. We tied his hands behind him, instead of to his sides for in the latter case, with such phenomenal strength, he could have worked himself free. Then Jim sat on his legs till I had them securely fastened. Tom came running up, in great alarm.

"Have you got him?" he yelled.

"Fast and tight," said Jim, "but he was a hard broncho to lasso."

The man lay helpless on the floor, but there was something terrible and dangerous about him, with his eyes glaring at us like a wild animal's, his hair was long, coming down over his shoulders and his beard was heavy and matted.

"Where do you suppose he came from?" asked Tom, "he could not have jumped from the ground."

"What are we to do with him?" I asked. "We are not running a museum for wild men."

Then we heard the loud crack of a whip and the rumble of a heavy vehicle.

"What do you suppose that is?" asked Jim, "for a desert country there seems to be a good deal doing."

"Hey, there, strangers," yelled a rancous voice, "come out of there, we want to meet you."

"We are coming," said Jim, and suiting the action to the word, he jumped out into the road. I and Tom followed immediately, and our astonished eyes saw a four-horse stage, filled with passengers. The driver was a smooth-shaven young fellow, with a sombrero and a rifle near him with a couple of pistols in his belt. I say he was young but nobody would have been inclined to trifle with him on that score. Because from the expression of his face you could see that he was strictly business.

"Waal, boys, are you traveling alone?" he asked, "this is bad country to be lose in."

We liked him because he did not give us any guff about being kids.

"Yes," Jim answered, "there is three of us, and we manage all right."

"I reckon you kin look out for yourselves pretty well. Have you seen anything of a runaway man?"

"Sure," replied Jim, "we have got him lassoed and corraled in the wagon."

"Hoe-e-e," he whistled, in surprise, "you fellows are huskies all right. He's wild, crazy, that fellow's locoed."

"You can have him," said Jim, "we are not running an orphan asylum."

"All right, Bill and I will take care of him."

The two of them got down from the stage and together they lifted the wild man out of the wagon.

"You boys certainly did a good job," they said, as they examined the ropes.

"I guess you will have to let us have that rope," said Jim, "we need it to lariat our horses."

Of course, young fellow," said the driver, and he got a rawhide lariat from the coach. No sooner were the ropes loosened than the man sprang to his feet and wrenched himself away from Bill, who was taken by surprise. He made for the wagon, intending probably to get some weapon. Jim was

too quick for him, for he flung himself in a low tackle at the man's knees and before he could get up, the driver and Bill flung themselves upon him. Even then it was a terrible struggle and we boys had to help before he could be firmly secured. Finally it was accomplished.

The driver wiped the sweat from his face. "You boys were considerable help in this fracas. I wouldn't mind having you along when we run into Injuns."

We knew that this was a compliment from the right source, and we appreciated it accordingly.

"Who is this fellow?" asked Jim, "he didn't wait for an introduction, but just helped himself to our outfit and skedaddled."

"Oh, he ain't responsible, poor fellow, we picked him up several days ago on the prairie, just running wild. We couldn't catch him nohow. So Bill took one of the leaders and chased after him till he could get close enough to lasso him."

"How did he ever get way out here?" asked Jim. "There isn't any lunatic asylum around this part of the state."

"No, but there ought to be," said the driver, "We have got the beginnings of one right now in the stage. There's three fellows we picked up who were trying to sail a wagon across the prairie and got busted down and we had to rescue them."

"I bet it was the judge and those two guys," said Jim; "was there two fellows with handkerchiefs around their necks and little toy pistols?"

"The same," declared the driver, "and the old gent with 'em is quite a sport and wears a long-tail coat."

"That's the party," declared Tom, "but where are they? Those two boys ought to be out here with their popguns kicking up a dust."

"Oh, they are inside there," said Bill, pointing to the stage, "snoring away, peaceful as kittens."

"All three drunk," said the driver, "but this fellow is different. I'm kind of sorry for him, because I figure that he has been captured by the Injuns, there's some of their trademarks on his body. I shouldn't be surprised if he has been a ranchman and them Injuns have swooped down on his place and killed his wife and children, after their style and taken this fellow off. Then he's gone crazy and those redskins are afraid as death of a crazy person, and they turned him loose on the plains, and he has been roaming around like a wild animal until we found him."

"How did he get away from you?" I asked.

"Oh, he's cunning, all right," said the driver, "and he was so quiet and well behaved for a day or two, that we quit watching him close and the first chance he got he broke and run and if you fellows

hadn't stopped him he would have been running yet. I suppose you boys are going into the mountains, like everybody else, to make your fortunes."

"Yes," said Tom, "that's exactly what we are after."

"Well, I wish you luck," said the driver. "If you could only keep up, we would like your company, but we travel fast with four horses. You want to look out, you will be in the Indian country in a few days. Instead of taking the south fork of the road if I were you boys, I would take the road to the north. The forks are at the next road station, thirty-five miles from here. The Apaches have been raiding the regular line and they are bad devils to get mixed with. Well, we will have to be starting."

"We will help you get this man into the stage," said Jim. This we did and fitted him in snugly between Percy and Spencer, who were sleeping the sleep of the drunk. We laughed to think of their surprise when they would wake up and find a crazy man between them.

"I reckon they will think that they have got the D. T.," said Tom.

"Goodbye," said the driver, shaking us each by the hand. What a grip he had.

"I hope I'll run across you boys again."

"It can't be too soon," Jim said and to this Tom

and I also cordially agreed. As the team started he raised his hands as though draining a glass.

"Here's luck."

Then with a flourish and crack of the whip the four-horse stage swept down the road at a rattling gait and before it disappeared in a cloud of dust, the driver waved his gauntleted hand at us and we waved out hats in return.

"He's fine," declared Tom, "I like that fellow."

"Just the kind you can tie to," said Jim.

"He isn't at all like the stage driver you read about in Wild West books, and he uses good grammar too. I bet he isn't just an ordinary frontiersman."

"He knows his business, though," said Jim. "Did you see how he handled that team?"

"And he has a good eye in his head. I bet the Indians wouldn't spring any ambushes on him," I concluded.

We found in our travels that though we ran across a good many hard characters, still there were always a few good, honest men thrown in. "Men whom you could tie to," as Tom said. If there were the horse thieves and the renegade Indian whom we had met in our travels, there were also Mr. Hoskins and his family and this stage driver, whom we had taken a fancy to.

"What do you think about taking the north

road, as the stage driver advised?" asked Tom.

"I think it would be a mighty good thing," I said, "I don't want any more excitement of any kind. With Injuns creeping up on me at night and crazy men jumping up behind us in the middle of the day, I feel the need of a rest."

"I guess we had better do as he said," admitted Jim, though I thought rather regretfully; "we will find enough Indians when we get to the mountains, without mixing with them on the plains."

CHAPTER XXIX

THE DRY CREEK

THAT night we camped in the dry bed of a creek, with it's thirsty sands and white bald rocks, with a stunted growth of cottonwoods along the banks. Here and there were pools of water, but that was all the moisture there was, and we had to make the best of it.

"I wish I could see a nice, clear, running stream, like we have back East," said Tom, "I'm getting sick of this dry country."

"You wait until we get to the mountains," said Jim, "and you will see some fine streams, I promise you that."

"And trout in 'em, too," I said.

"I bet we will live high when we get there," said Jim. "Mountain trout for breakfast and grouse for supper."

"There is no doubt about our living high, about ten or fifteen thousand feet," I said.

"Don't get funny, Jo," said Jim, and he and Tom sat on me simultaneously.

"Do you suppose that we will get up as high

as fifteen thousand feet?" asked Tom, after my discipline was over.

"Pike's Peak is nearly fifteen thousand feet," said Jim.

"No," I replied, "the geography says that it is 14,147 feet high."

I prided myself on my accuracy and if the boys would not let me make puns, I was willing to show my superiority in some other way.

"Oh, you are a wise guy," jeered Jim, "what's the difference of a few feet anyway?"

"You would find it would make a big difference if you had to climb the Peak."

"Look up north, boys," exclaimed Tom, "there's going to be a terrible storm to-night, if looks count for anything."

"It does looks black," said Jim. "We will have to tack down the tent good and fast."

"I guess you boys had better sleep in the wagon to-night, even if it is crowded," I said.

After some discussion, the boys agreed to this. We stood watching the storm come up over the plains.

"The last few days have certainly been weather breeders," I said, "so awful hot. It will be a nice thing to have plenty of water."

It was a fascinating sight. The great mass of blackly rolling clouds with white messengers of

flying clouds going before. Then there was a continual flash of lightning and crash of thunder. Now came the solid front of gray falling water sweeping over the plains toward us and it struck us with a great rush of wind. The horses turned tail to it with heads bent down. We jumped into the wagon and put up the rubber apron to keep the rain out of the front, but in spite of its protection the rain came in.

"We are bright ones," exclaimed Jim, "we ought to have turned the wagon with its tail to the storm."

"Let's do it now," said Jim.

"We will get soaking wet," I objected.

"What's the diff, we will anyway," replied Tom, "if we don't do something."

"I tell you, boys, let's go in swimming, or out swimming," said Jim.

And he threw his clothes off in a jiffy, and we followed suit. Then out we went into the warm rain. It was fine sport, a veritable shower bath. We hauled and shoved the wagon until we finally got it's back to the storm. The horses looking on in great interest and more or less astonishment. Then we skylarked around trying to roll each other in the mud. We managed to get Jim down and gave him a good rolling till he looked as black as a coon.

But our romp was soon brought to a stop.

"What's that hit me on the back?" I said.

"Quit throwing stones at me," yelled Jim, "or I'll give you both a good licking."

"It's hailing," exclaimed Tom.

It certainly was and we made a dash for the wagon, with the hail coming faster and faster, and striking all around us and sometimes hitting us smartly on the backs and the legs, but it did not take us many seconds to get into the wagon.

"We will have to do something for the horses," said Jim, "they can't stand this bombardment very long."

So we hastily put on some old clothes and pulling our hats down over our foreheads, we were ready with the blankets which were the only protection we could afford the animals.

"It's just like a battle," said Jim, "the bullets come just as fast as this."

"That's why they speak of a hail of bullets," I said.

"Well, we will see who gets killed first," said Jim. "The one who gets hit in the head is dead."

"All right," we agreed, and ventured out in the storm. The hail fell thickly around us, covering the ground with white bullets. It was no use trying to dodge. I got a glancing shot on either shoulder, but not enough to disable me. I saw Jim get a

couple of wounds in the leg. Then crash, Tom was struck square on top of the head and the hailstone bounced up in the air.

"You're dead," I yelled.

"No I ain't," declared Tom, vigorously, "it only jarred me a little."

"It didn't hit him in a vital place," laughed Jim.

When we reached the horses they were shivering and cowering under the attack of the storm. We threw the blankets over the two and fastened them securely, and this was a good deal of protection to them. Then we rushed back to the wagon and, taking off our clothes, we rubbed down thoroughly and turned in for the night. The storm continued with unabated violence but we slept snug as three bugs in a rug.

I do not know what time it was but something woke me up. It was still raining, but more gently and there were occasional flashes of lightning.

"What's that noise?" I asked, waking up the two boys.

There was a continuous steady roar all around us. We hastened to look out.

"My heavens! Just look," exclaimed Jim.

It was enough to make anyone exclaim with fear. Where there had been the dry bed of a creek was a raging river, swirling all around the wagon and a little further out was the main current humping

mudily along at a great rate. Trunks of trees and trees themselves were coming tumbling down on the current. It was a dangerous and ugly situation.

"Lucky the horses are lariated out of danger," said Jim.

"What are we to do," I asked, "it's still rising and the wagon is liable to be carried off with us in it."

Just then crash came a tree against the box of the wagon, and in a short time the water began to come in.

"This won't do," said Jim, vigorously, "we have got to get that tree loose."

Cautiously he got out of the wagon and down into the swirling water.

"My, but it is cold!" he exclaimed.

"It sure is," I shivered, "it's like ice."

"That's the hail," said Jim.

We all three worked around to the side of the wagon where the tree was, the wind waving the branches that were above the water. The stream was above our waists. We worked furiously and finally got the trunk of the tree around and cast it loose. Then the current took it out into the stream, where it rolled slowly over and over. The wagon being thus freed of the tree acted no more as a dam and the water went down below the bed. We climbed back in and held a council of war.

"We have got to get out of here," I said, my teeth chattering from cold and excitement, "or we will be drowned."

"We can't give up the ship," said Jim.

"There's no chance to get the horses in here. They would go wild," remarked Tom.

"We must think of some scheme, and quick too," said Jim, "the water is rising fast. (The question is what would you boys do who are reading this, if you were in our shoes? It's up to you.)"

"I tell you what," said Jim, "there is just one thing to do. I will carry the two harnesses and you two get the whiffle-trees and all the rope we have."

We put this plan into immediate execution, though we did not know exactly what Jim was after, still we had a general idea.

It was hard work getting the whiffle-tree loose from the tongue under the water, but we finally managed it. By this time Jim had the horses harnessed and we made them go as close to the wagon as we could, though they were terribly nervous, jumping and snorting, but we finally got the rope fast to the hind axle of the wagon, the other end being attached to the whiffle-tree. Tom and I held the tongue and guided the wagon while Jim urged the horses and though it was hard to start, when it got to going it did not take us long to get the wagon to dry land.

We were pretty well exhausted after our hard work in the water. It was about as disagreeable an adventure as we had so far experienced and we were mighty thankful to get out of it as well as we did.

"I guess you won't complain about there being no water in Kansas, Tom," grinned Jim.

"I don't care for it all in one lump," replied Tom, "it's possible to get too much of a good thing."

"I reckon we won't need a bath for a while," laughed Jim. "This ought to last us."

"How are we ever going to get over the river?" I asked, "it's worse than the Arkansas."

"We'll cross that bridge when we get to it," replied Jim, "and that won't be till morning. I'm going to turn in."

It was because there wasn't any bridge to cross that worried me.

Then we went to sleep for what was left of the balance of the night.

CHAPTER XXX

BEYOND THE DIVIDE — THE CROSSING

THE next morning, it was still overcast and lowering, and we had a good look at the "dry creek," which was still a swollen river, but we could see that it had gone down considerably by the dirty mud line high up on the plain.

"How are we going to cross, I should like to know?" I asked.

"We will see about that after breakfast," said Jim.

So after breakfast we hitched up and Jim took the ribbons.

"Now, are you ready?" asked Jim. "Tuck up your feet," and he drove boldly in. The horses were nervous about going in the ugly, swirling stream. There is always something worrisome about an unknown ford. Before we reached the main current the wagon gave a sudden tilt and went way upon one side and Tom and I threw ourselves to the upper side while all the loose cargo shifted.

"I hope you don't strike any more of those big boulders," I said, when our ship finally righted herself.

"Don't you worry," said Jim stoutly, but looking rather pale.

We were now approaching the main current and the water was getting deeper and was almost up to the wagon box. The horses now showed signs of balking and started to turn around.

"Here, Jo, give them the whip," urged Jim, and I stood up in front and laid on with a good will.

"Get ap, Bill! Get ap, Carl!"

We got them straightened out and they plunged into the current. There was no turning back now. It was all the horses could do to keep their feet. Once Bill stumbled and almost went under. When he recovered his footing he plunged ahead.

"Hurry up, boys, there comes a tree," yelled Tom.

Sure enough, it was coming around the bend and looked as big as a house. It was a giant among cottonwoods, which had taken the stream a long time to undermine. It was bearing down directly upon us. Its big trunk looking like the end of a battering ram. I whipped the horses frantically and they plunged up the other bank and the branches of the tree struck the top of our wagon. It was as close as that. Then we emerged dripping but safe on the top of the opposite bank.

"My, but I'm glad to get out of that," exclaimed Jim, "it was a close call."

We stopped to let the horses breathe and looked

back at the river that had given us so much work and trouble.

"The next time we camp in the bed of a dry creek with a storm coming up we ought to be drowned," declared Tom, with emphasis.

"Yes, we have certainly learned something," said Jim, "and we won't forget it, either."

The horses having rested, we started on our journey. About three o'clock in the afternoon, we reached the road house that the stage driver had told us about. It was a low adobe building with a dugout near and a shackly barn. A couple of dogs ran out to welcome us and barked furiously at Ben, who from his place of vantage in the front of the wagon replied with equal ferocity and perfect safety. A man came to the door to see the cause of the commotion. He looked like a regular Westerner, in leather chaps and broad sombrero, with a leather band around it ornamented with silver.

"You are the boys the driver told me about, and he said if there was anything I could do for you I was to. I reckon it's no use to offer you liquor, for you don't look like boys who drink."

"I tell you what you might get us, some bread and coffee," suggested Jim.

"I'll tell the Chink to fire up," and he went inside.

"What's a Chink, do you suppose?" Tom asked.

"I don't know; I suppose we will find out."

Hitching our team under the shed, we went in. It was a long, low room, with a bar at one end. There were a number of cheap prints on the walls.

Down the center of the room was a plain wooden table without any cover. In the center there was,—not a bouquet, but a bottle of green pepper sauce, and of red tomato ketchup.

We sat down and in about ten minutes a Chinaman came in.

"That's the 'Chink,'" said Tom, "what a funny name."

He moved noiselessly around back of us and put a plate of venison before us, and three big bowls of coffee. Then a little later he came in with some griddle cakes. It was a rough sort of a restaurant, but we thoroughly enjoyed the meal. Our host sat across from us, with his chair tilted back against the wall. And talked about various things.

"How are the Indians in this section?" I asked.

"Nothing doing for a month past, but they are raiding things south of here. Jake was saying that you had better take the northern roads."

"We have made up our minds to take that route," said Jim.

"I reckon you will get through clear, but you want to keep your eyes peeled," he cautioned.

"Trust us to do that," replied Tom.

"I won't worry. You can take care of yourselves or you wouldn't have got this far alive. It's a fine country out here, but it is exciting, and it's no place for fools or smart alecks."

"We found it exciting enough last night," said Jim, and we told him our experience.

He laughed heartily at our plight.

"It would have been a joke on you boys, if you had got drowned in this dry country. But I reckon it larned you something."

"It did that," admitted Tom. "No more camping in dry creeks for us."

We had now got well filled up and prepared to take up our journey.

"I'll go with you boys and git you started on the right trail."

He swung himself on his broncho and jogged along side of the wagon talking with us and now and then giving us valuable pointers. After going several miles we came to a fork where three roads branched.

"This is your road boys," he said.

We thanked him heartily.

"Good luck to you," he said as he turned and rode away. "Keep your scalps on."

We wished him goodbye and assured him that we would.

We soon got into a country that was broken,

with hills and then broad, low mesas, covered with pines and we felt that we should soon be through with the plains and we were not sorry. For several days the sky was overcast with the clouds hanging low, close to the horizon. It was much cooler too.

"I wish it would do something," said Tom, "either rain or clear up."

It was the evening of the third day after we had left the road house, and we had gone into camp on a long, rolling ridge, extending for miles and known in the West as "A Divide."

"I guess it will clear up," said Jim, who always took a hopeful view of things.

In the morning I woke up early and sure enough the sun was shining brightly.

"Hurrah! hurrah!" I heard Tom yelling in front of the tent.

"Pike's Peak or Bust, rah, rah," there was no mistaking his enthusiasm.

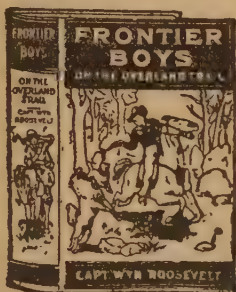
I got out in a hurry and joined in the yelling myself. For there in the brilliant morning sunshine, loomed clear and distinct, though miles away, "The Great Peak," with snow crowned summit and massive rocky shoulder and the lower mountains were around his great base, like a crumpled cloak that his strength has cast aside.

We danced around until we were tired.

"It's great!" we yelled. It certainly was. And you cannot blame us for our enthusiasm, for you would have felt the same if you had been in our shoes.

After breakfast we hitched up and started merrily off down the grade and the chapter of our lives and adventures on the overland trail was finished. In the next narrative, "Frontier Boys in Colorado," I will tell of our experiences in the mountains and of the exciting times we had there and of our search for the two children who were stolen from our friends in Kansas, by the Indians. I can say for Tom and Jim, as well as for myself, that we would be glad to have you come along with us, and share our dangers and adventures.

THE END



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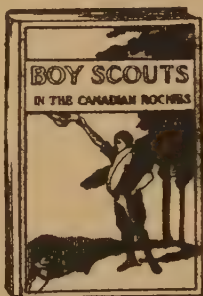
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